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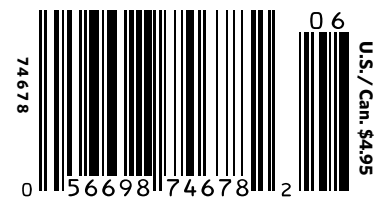


# ME



**PLUS:** The war on activists  
Omaha's response to religious hate  
The spirituality of biking

Sierra Club President Aaron Mair  
on why civil rights, fair wages, and  
environmental justice are all part  
of ensuring safe neighborhoods—  
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**AN EPIDEMIOLOGICAL**-spatial analyst. We'll admit it: Before we began working on this issue, we didn't know what that was, much less why the Sierra Club would want to elect one as its newest president.

But for Aaron Mair, the 57th leader of the oldest environmental organization in the U.S., epidemiological-spatial analysis—or how health outcomes relate to a particular region or neighborhood—explains why people of color must be engaged in work against climate change and pollution: Their communities are more likely to be directly affected. “This is not some sort of distant reality for communities of color,” Mair tells journalist Raven Rakia in our cover story. “They’re experiencing health problems in real time.”

Mair's own environmental activism was born of necessity: His daughters were developing upper-respiratory issues, a result of

the waste incinerator in their 80-percent-black neighborhood. Through protests and boycotts, Mair's community succeeded in shutting down the incinerator—and then began the long work of forcing the company to take responsibility for the health issues it had inflicted on the neighborhood.

Fast-forward three decades, and Mair is the first African American to serve as president of the Sierra Club. But he isn't the first to notice that racism, climate change, pollution, living wages, and voting rights are part of a web of overlapping issues that keep marginalized people from attaining wealth or health.

This phenomenon of overlapping forms of oppression is known as “intersectionality,” a word you'll see defined on “Homepage,” a new section of the magazine featuring



some of our favorite pieces from Sojourners online. But you'll also see intersectionality at work in other stories: Midwesterners overcoming fear of the racial and religious other; Kenyan peace activists diffusing religious violence with economic solutions; black female poets mourning violence against people of color.

Intersectionality confronts us with the tangle of broken systems we have created. However, as Sojourners' senior associate web editor Catherine Woodiwiss writes in the debut of her bimonthly column, “Marginalia,” recognizing brokenness doesn't exclude joy. Recalling a recent trip to Hagia Sophia, a beautiful building in Istanbul with a messy history, Woodiwiss suggests that perhaps delight helps us “imagine the possibilities of these systems as their best selves.” ■

## Letters

### Wrestling with Jesus

“Who Is This ‘Jesus?’” (Belden C. Lane, April 2016) is a beautiful and challenging reflection by one of the most authentic and honest voices of faith writing today. I keep wrestling with this same Jesus, whoever he is, because the struggle itself places me on a path that's increasingly merciful and just. Thank you for this!

**Terry Minchow-Proffitt**  
*Kirkwood, Missouri*

### Don't Leave Out Native Americans

Anne Courtright made a very important point about the treatment of Native Americans in her letter (“The Original ‘Original Sin’”) published on page 5 of your April issue. Sadly, on page 7 Jim Wallis omitted them when he speaks of “powerful voices.”

Are they simply not powerful because there are not so many of them? Ought we to be asking why they are not so numerous? Because we exterminated so many of them or isolated them on reservations.

I've lived and worked in rural Montana, Alaska, and Wyoming most of my life among different tribes. I care deeply about black lives mattering, but I grieve at the

omission of the profoundly powerful voices of Native Americans. Don't leave Native Americans out of the conversation when it comes to multiracial truth-telling.

**Su DeBree**  
*Livingston, Montana*

### Jealously Protect Their Rights

I don't know a lot about the ins and outs of this topic (“Voting Rights—and Wrongs” by Myrna Perez, April 2016) but I try to think of ways all sides of an argument can be helpful. I'm convinced most on either side are good folks and want what's best—they just have different ideas about what will work. Here are some ideas: Churches and communities could raise money to help get the proper ID, offer rides to and from to get the paperwork done, and offer time off for employees. I don't think I have a problem with limiting voting to citizens and other legal, long-term residents, but we should jealously protect their rights and do anything reasonable to get as close to 100 percent as possible.

**Travis Chamberlain**  
*Facebook comment*

### Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Natalie Wigg-Stevenson's article “The

Agony and Ecstasy of Baptism” (March 2016) reminded me of this story: When my friend gave birth to her daughter in 1980, she just could not face baptizing her infant in her Roman Catholic tradition since it would be the Father (priest) baptizing her child in the name of the “Father [God], Son, and Holy Spirit.” Her biological father had routinely “visited” her in the night for several years before she was old enough to move out, and whenever she heard the word “father” she remembered his twisted face above her.

Since I was active in the Metropolitan Community Church at the time, we invited her to have the baptism there. We used alternative language for the Trinity, and she selected “In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” joyfully. It was a beautiful ceremony and liturgically satisfying for everyone involved.

**Richard J. Follett**  
*Van Nuys, California*

**Thumbs up! (Or down.)** Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, Sojourners, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington DC 20010. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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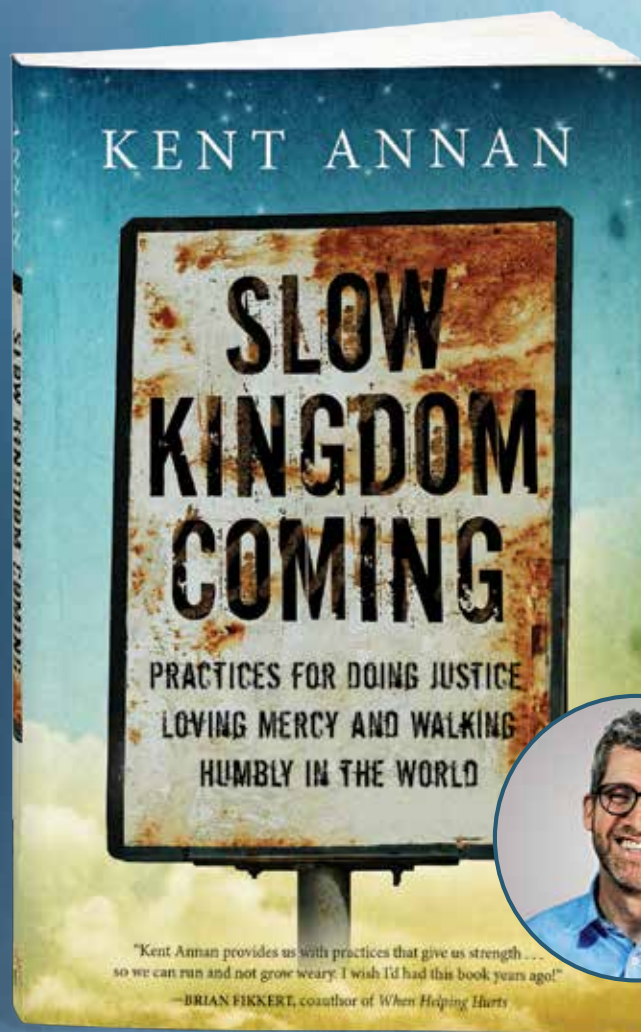
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BY JIM WALLIS

## Denouncing the Politics of Hate



**WHAT ISIS AND** other terror groups who share their views want is precisely to *terrorize* us. They want to turn our fear of them into fear of everyone who looks like them, and everyone who follows the religion they are trying to hijack. They want us to suspect, fear, and hate the 1.6 billion people of the world who practice Islam—including millions of Muslim Americans. They want to provoke us to anger, and they hope that in our anger and pain we will overreact.

Right now, unfortunately, they are succeeding with too many of our fellow Christians, and even with some of the candidates for our highest political offices.

When ISIS terrorists succeed in provoking Islamophobic responses, they come closer to their goal of dividing the world into two categories—Muslims and non-Muslims—which also brings them closer to their goal of claiming the mantle



all of our children whose fears these attacks kindle, and the fears we in turn feel for them.

While the terrorists focus on provoking a political reaction, we must pray, remember, and focus our minds and hearts on the human lives that have been ended or forever changed. It's especially important in these times to remember our Muslim brothers and sisters all over the world, who are killed in much higher numbers than non-Muslims by ISIS and their ilk.

Second, we must resist with all of our beings the hateful, ugly, and violent reactions to people who are *not* responsible for these atrocities. In particular, we must resist attacks or discrimination against Muslims and hateful language against the religion of Islam. We must avoid re-victimizing Muslims, who are already suffering from ISIS violence, in our responses to terrorism. Instead, Christians and other people of faith should reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters to build bridges of understanding, love, and mutual respect. Then we must *all* work together to undermine, disrupt, and end this evil violence.

Finally, we must utterly denounce the message of political leaders who speak and act to

politicize this terrorist violence in service of their own political agendas and ambitions. In particular, we must denounce the message of those who have called for the "patrolling" of Muslim neighborhoods in the United States and for putting Muslim-American citizens under surveillance. We must also

denounce the words of those who stir fear of more attacks and propose to protect "us" from "them" by monitoring Muslim Americans, banning Muslim immigrants from the United States, torturing suspects and killing the families of terrorists, and even suggesting they might be open using nuclear weapons against ISIS.

The politics of hate are wrong in Mosul, in Beirut, in Brussels, in Paris, in Ankara, in Pakistan, in San Bernardino—and they are also wrong in the public discourse of the United States. People of faith should denounce the politics of hate everywhere—whether propagated by violent terrorists or by political leaders or candidates of any political party.

We must deny the terrorists their victory by not becoming more like them in succumbing to hate and violence. Rather than letting the terrorists change who we are, we must become more like our truest selves and more like the Jesus we follow.

It's time to turn toward God and not into our own human fears and hatreds. And it's time to listen to what Jesus told his disciples again and again: "Be not afraid." ■

*Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.*

Jesus told his disciples again and again: "Be not afraid."

of being the only "true defenders" of Islam. Islamophobia thus directly helps the terrorists recruit more young Muslims to their cause and makes it harder for other Muslims to work against them.

Here are some ways that we can deny the terrorists their victory:

FIRST, WE MUST focus on *life* and the terrible human suffering that these attacks are causing all over the world. When you add up all of those killed, maimed, wounded, and traumatized—and all their family members, friends, fellow congregants, and co-workers—the number of human beings impacted by terrorist violence is almost countless. We must also include the impact on



Arif Ali/Getty Images



## Hear our Prayer

Pakistani Christians pay tribute to victims of an Easter bombing in Lahore that killed more than 70 people, including both Christians and Muslims. The bombing occurred 10 days after U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry declared that ISIS "is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims."

By Jean Stokan and Scott Wright

## A War on Activism

Since 2011, hundreds of environmental activists have been murdered in Honduras and around the world.

**THE WORD MARTYR** means "witness." In times past, it meant dying for one's beliefs; but increasingly it means dying for one's faith because of justice.

On March 3, Honduran Indigenous leader Berta Cáceres was brutally murdered in her home. As co-founder of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, Cáceres had led the Lenca Indigenous communities in a non-violent struggle to defend the sacred lands, forests, and water that her people have protected for generations.

She was beloved by many around the world for her extraordinary leadership on the environment, recognized in 2015 when she received the Goldman Environmental Prize for "sustained and significant efforts to protect and enhance the natural environment, often at great personal risk." Her assassination sparked a global outcry, including a demand from the Vatican for an independent investigation into her death.

Cáceres's life and death is a witness to

what Pope Francis calls "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." Her martyrdom embodies the intimate connection between creation justice and social justice for the poor that is at the heart of Francis' recent encyclical on the environment.

For years, Cáceres and the Lenca communities fought to block the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River in western Honduras, which would have flooded large areas of land and cut off the supply of water, food, and medicine for the Lenca peoples. In addition, its construction violated the rights and sovereignty of Indigenous people to decide whether such mega-projects should be undertaken at all.

Since the 2009 coup in Honduras that deposed a democratically elected government and replaced it with a government more favorable to international business, hydroelectric and mining companies have been given concessions to exploit nearly half the country. This has led to an unprecedented pillaging of the land's natural wealth,

bringing grave harm to the natural environment, displacing entire communities, and targeting environmental activists in alarming numbers.

In August 2013, Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández established a new military police force, after running on a campaign promise to put "a soldier on every corner." The results have been devastating.

CÁCERES IS ONE of more than 100 land and environmental activists in Honduras who have been assassinated in the past five years. Less than two weeks after Cáceres' murder, her colleague Nelson Garcia was murdered by unidentified gunmen despite the region being in the international spotlight. After Garcia's murder, several European funders pulled out of the Agua Zarca dam project.

The courageous witness of Cáceres, Garcia, and others challenges a global economy and political order based on structural injustice, institutionalized violence, and



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social sin. In words used by Óscar Romero, the martyred archbishop of San Salvador, to describe the fate of those who work for justice, Berta Cáceres “got in the way.” That’s why she was murdered.

What happened to Cáceres is not simply another lamentable death of a human rights activist. Her murder exposes the utter failure of U.S. policy in Honduras and U.S. complicity in a culture of impunity, particularly dating back to the 2009 coup, that prioritizes business interests over human rights. The U.S. is funding the growing militarization of the Honduran society, especially the security forces reportedly involved in widespread human right violations.

Before she was murdered, Cáceres said that she listened to the spirit of the Gualcarque River to determine her next

actions. She jumped into the river, and it told her to go forward. The river told her that she would prevail.

In her life and in her death, Cáceres embodied “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor,” a cry for life. The Lenca communities she served continue to defend the land and bear witness to the truth. With Berta Cáceres and the great cloud of witnesses, and with those who still live the drama of cross and resurrection in their daily lives, we are reminded: The martyrs have a claim on our lives. In the words of her people: “Berta Cáceres did not die, she multiplied.” ■

*Jean Stokan is director of the Institute Justice Team for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Scott Wright is director of the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach.*

By Michael Plekon

## Communion or Chaos?

Preparing for the first full gathering of Orthodox Christians in 12 centuries has been a holy mess—but it’s a gift nonetheless.

**EASTERN ORTHODOX** churches often pass beneath the media radar, despite their status as truly ancient. The attacks by ISIS on Orthodox communities in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere have brought into focus dwindling populations of Christians in the Middle East. Russia’s invasion of Crimea and popular uprisings in Kiev raised the alarm on the tenuous position of Ukrainian Orthodox churches.

In February, headlines were made again when Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill met in Cuba, the first-ever meeting of a pope and a Moscow patriarch. Additionally, a historic meeting will be held in June on the Greek island of Crete, bringing together leaders of all 14 loosely linked Orthodox churches for the first time in 12 centuries.

Both the pope-patriarch encounter and the troubled preparations for the convening of the pan-Orthodox leaders are extremely complex; one might call them Byzantine.

The meeting between the pope and the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church was years—and several papacies—in the making. There were always obstacles, not the least of which was the Soviet system and bitter internecine church wars in Ukraine

that pitted the Roman Catholic-affiliated Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church against the Russian Orthodox Church. After the end of the Soviet regime, the UGCC entered a renaissance and the Orthodox churches in Ukraine splintered, which Moscow has cited as a reason for refusing any meeting between the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church.

Despite that, some observers think that the Putin government exerted pressure on the Russian Orthodox Church to create the opening that led to the meeting in Havana, which was welcomed as a breakthrough in both ecclesiastical and diplomatic relations.

Yet the joint statement released by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill has pleased very few. A sometimes vague but mostly careful text celebrates all the right things—including the need for an end to violence in Syria, North Africa, and other Middle East locations where Christians are imperiled. However, the still-occupied Crimea and embattled eastern Ukraine receive an indeterminate assessment; one that serves Russian interests mostly by refusing to acknowledge Putin’s aggressive policies of invasion and disruption there.

## From the Archives

June 1982

### Eating the Bread of Anxious Toil

**IT WAS** after midnight at the end of another long, busy day, and I had an early breakfast meeting the next morning. I decided to read a psalm before I turned off the light and, with no particular rhyme or reason, settled on Psalm 127. Although I have read this psalm before, I was completely unprepared for the shock it gave me that night.

Verse two caught me completely off guard: "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil." I was struck right between the eyes. There could not have been a more vivid and disturbingly apt description of my life and the lives of most people I know here at Sojourners and elsewhere.

Busyness has become a way of life for many of us, even a status symbol. Our work is justified only if we are continually active and preoccupied. There are so many necessary and urgent things to be done. After one task is completed, there are others always waiting in the wings, needing our immediate attention. To slow down, to rest, often seems out of the question, a lack of commitment, a sign of weakness. Not only our days, but many of our evenings and weekends become filled too. We are not just eating the bread of anxious toil; we are daily gulping down loaf after loaf after loaf. "Give us this day," we pray, "our daily bread (of anxious toil)." ■

*Joe Roos was publisher of Sojourners when this article appeared*



The June meeting of Orthodox leaders was called by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, head of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Committees have been at work for more than 50 years to define crucial issues that a Pan-Orthodox Council should address.

These topics include who leads among the churches (primacy), the church calendar, rules on fasting and on marriage with non-Orthodox Christians, how to grant independence to local churches, how to hold ecumenical relationships with non-Orthodox churches, and the broader role of the Orthodox churches in the world. That final area raises questions about the status of LGBT people, same-sex marriage, abortion, the environment, civil and religious rights, and freedom—all the business that needs discussing when you haven't met since 787 AD.

Without the Soviet regimes as a common enemy impeding a council, the churches have discovered that their internal conflicts remain as obstacles. At a preliminary planning meeting outside Geneva in January, the Russian Orthodox Church successfully advocated against a majority-rules process, favoring one in which any church in

disagreement on any issue can veto, effectively blocking not only action but even discussion on that issue. As a result, several important issues have already been removed from the June agenda. There are also reports of some church leaders now disapproving of previously accepted documents on ecumenical relations, marriage, and the church in the contemporary world.

It is not at all clear that the expected leaders will all attend the council. Already the location has been switched from Istanbul to Greece because of Russian-Turkish political tensions.

A historical perspective would cause one to be skeptical of both the meeting between pope and patriarch as well as the forthcoming council in Crete. However, one should also recognize the presence of the Spirit in our less-than-perfect endeavors. These movements toward communion, despite imperfections, are gifts. ■

*Michael Plekon is a professor at Baruch College of the City University of New York. He serves as a priest at St. Gregory the Theologian Orthodox Church in Wappingers Falls, N.Y.*

By Maria Santelli

## 'It's Just Registration, It's Not the Draft'

**Will women be required to register for war? It's a matter of Christian conscience.**

**WITH THE RECENT** decision to open combat positions in the U.S. armed forces to women, Selective Service registration is back in the news, in the courts, and in Congress. While much of the debate has focused on issues of gender—will young women be required to register?—the problems with draft registration are extensive and worthy of more thorough consideration.

For many people of faith and people of conscience, questions around Selective Service registration are not new, and, ethically speaking, nothing is different now that women may be part of the equation. For many, the questions around Selective Service registration have long been ones of preparation for war, militarization of our communities, and coercion of individual conscience.

The Selective Service act of 1917

launched the modern American version of the government raising an army in a time of war. In 1975, following the Vietnam War, draft registration was suspended, but it was reinstated under President Carter in 1980 and continues today. There is no option to register as a conscientious objector, no matter one's religious beliefs.

Over the last 35 years, millions of young men have violated the law by failing to register. Only 20 of them have been prosecuted for the felony offense—19 of those were resisting for reasons of faith or conscience.

The last indictment for failure to register was filed in 1986. The government thought it would prosecute a handful of resisters to set an example and encourage compliance. The strategy backfired. When these conscientious objectors were interviewed on the evening news, claiming allegiance to a higher



moral law, noncompliance with registration actually *increased*, much to the government's dismay. It had underestimated the power of conscience. It failed to take into account a universal truth: When we follow the counsel of our conscience, we tend to make better decisions.

In 1982, federal, state, and Selective Service laws were enacted to force draft registration by making registration automatic. Individuals were given little opportunity to decide on their own behalf or to act on their beliefs. This tactic was borrowed directly from military training, which has been specifically designed to bypass the conscience and the natural human aversion to war. Consequently, critical thinking on the issue of draft registration has all but disappeared from our cultural consciousness.

AT THE CENTER on Conscience and War, we get calls daily from those struggling with questions of conscience and military service. Most say they grew up in a church, but almost none say these issues were discussed there. Why do so many faith communities neglect to tackle these critical issues? Maybe it's because militarism has become part of the social fabric: There are military ceremonies during sporting events and military recruiters are fixtures in our high schools, even our Christian schools. Maybe it's because we don't want to be accused of failing to "support the troops." Wouldn't we better "support the troops" and our larger community by having these critical conversations and teaching moral reasoning on such important issues?

Despite the spin that tries to trivialize registration ("It's just registration, it's not the draft"), the primary purpose of registration is to be prepared for war. Lawmakers, presidents, and the Supreme Court have all affirmed this position.

It always has been the responsibility of churches, faith communities, and pastors to serve as stewards and shepherds of conscience. The renewed interest in draft registration and the possibility of a mass registration of young women provide a perfect opening to initiate or deepen these discussions—perhaps even from the pulpit. ■

*Maria Santelli is the executive director of the Center on Conscience and War in Washington, D.C.*

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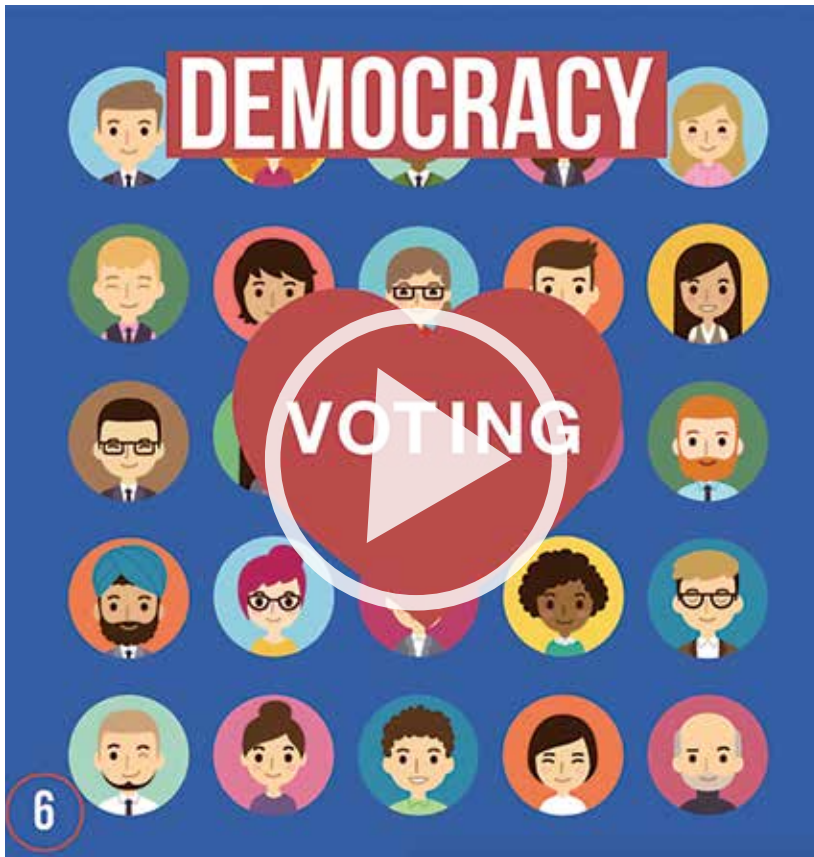
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## VIDEO



## How Stealing Elections Became Legal

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## QUOTED

**“In faith as well as in science, asking questions when faced with mystery is human nature. It's naive to think that we have the capacity to diminish God's power, love, or scope of action simply by asking questions.”**

**—Jenna Freudenburg**

on the relationship between God and science  
[sojo.net/gravity](http://sojo.net/gravity)

## SERIES

### What's race got to do with it?

When we recognize that different forms of oppression often overlap, we're talking about intersectionality. In a recent series on [sojo.net](http://sojo.net), faith leaders explained how they've seen racism interact with sexism, homophobia, environmental injustice, and other justice issues. Here's some of what they said:



"Access to safe green spaces is more available to whites, and the middle and upper classes."

**—Dianne Glave**



"White women reflexively use white privilege to not see anything on the roads of life outside of their own good intentions."

**—Inez Torres Davis**



"As an Asian-American activist, I must constantly negotiate what it means to be a woman faith leader—all while challenging misconceptions of the 'model minority' myth."

**—Elaina Ramsey**



"The greatest rise in asthma rates recently is seen among black children."

**—Jesse Bottoms**



"A political and socially conservative machine ... has used religion and fear-baiting to build a divide between the black church and the LGBTQ community."

**—Tonyia M. Rawls**

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sojourners | PRESENTS

# THE LINE

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**sojourners**

## Following Jesus by Staying Put

**THE ROAD WAS** bumpy—full of deep holes and harrowing possibilities for slippage down a roadside slope. My heart raced as I considered the possible headline back home: Bus tumbles down Israeli slope—50 Americans killed by Palestinians. Yes, that would likely be the headline, but it wouldn't tell the story.

As our bus rolled through this stretch southwest of Bethlehem, my heart raced as Amal Nassar explained that the area had been declared property of the Israeli state decades ago. Since then, Israel built smooth roads, but we weren't allowed on them. To the right of our bouncing bus was an adjacent highway reserved for Israelis—Palestinians are restricted from driving on these Israeli highways, relegated to the old dirt roads.

Our bus wound around sharp corners, up a hill until it came to a stop. There didn't seem to be any

many families have chosen to leave. Once they are gone for three years, the Israeli government claims that their property has been abandoned and that the state then has legal grounds to claim the power of eminent domain over the land.

AMAL NASSAR IS co-owner of Daher's Vineyard, a farm that has been legally owned by her family for 100 years—since 1916. The land was claimed by the Israeli government in 1991 and has been tied up in court proceedings ever since, according to the farm's website.

Since then, the Nassar family has transformed its family farm into the Tent of Nations, a place of multiethnic and interfaith dialogue, work, and learning. The Tent of Nations is also a place of creative nonviolent resistance to unjust state encroachment on Palestinian land.

As we came closer to the farm entrance, there was no more trash, and we began to see rocks with messages painted on them. The first one read: "We refuse to be enemies."

We walked further up the path and approached the main house, which sits atop a hill overlooking massive Israeli settlements on all sides. The house is a humble dwelling—simple and rustic. A black water storage container crowns the roof. A cable floats from the roof of the house to the roof of another building that holds massive solar panels. The Tent of Nations is resisting removal by living 100 percent off the grid. When the government shut off electricity, the family installed solar power. When the government shut off running water, the family installed compost toilets to produce bio gas. Using plastic bags



Rock at the entrance to Tent of Nations.

Lisa Sharon Harper

**At the Tent of Nations, Palestinians are resisting removal by living 100 percent off the grid.**

building structures in sight so I wondered why we'd stopped. Nassar explained that the Israeli government had set large boulders in the middle of the road to block traffic from reaching her family's farm, so we would have to hike the rest of the way.

We stepped off the bus and onto a dirt road strewn with rocks and trash—old tires, plastic bags, plastic bottles. When the Israeli government claimed the land, it ceased basic services such as trash pick-up, electricity, and running water to Palestinians in the area. It was an effort to make life so difficult that the Palestinians would choose to leave—in modern human rights terms, the world calls this ethnic cleansing. Nassar explained that

picked up from the roads to their farm, the women weave baskets and sell them.

Amal's brother, Robert, guided our group into a cave. This is the place where his family used to live. It was the home of his father, and his father's father before him. Now this cave has been transformed into a place of dialogue toward common understanding.

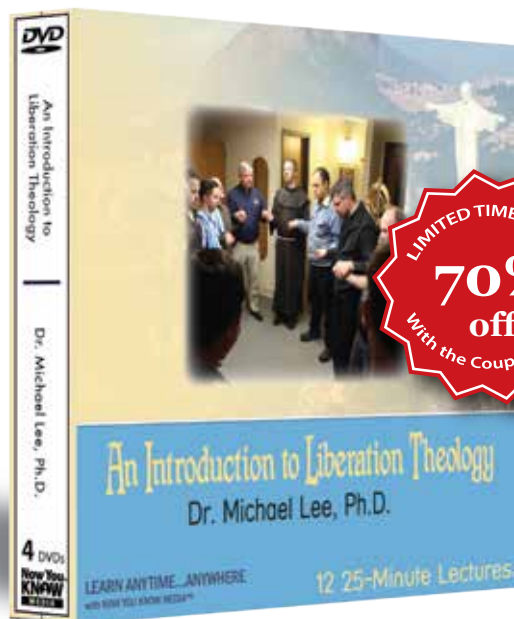
Robert said that there are four choices for how his family can deal with the systematic oppression they face from the Israeli government: 1) violence, 2) being resigned to victimhood, 3) running away (it's mainly Christians and educated Palestinians who have this option), and 4) refusing to fight and refusing to hate—acting differently because of their belief in the Son of Justice.

I boarded the bus overwhelmed by what I had witnessed. This humble family is living it. They are living what we preach and write about all the time. They are living the good news of the gospel. We do not have to be enemies. Reconciliation is possible. Resistance to violence against other and self is possible. ■



*Lisa Sharon Harper is Sojourners' chief church engagement officer and author of The Very Good Gospel (June 2016).*





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# Leaving the Silos Behind

**Sierra Club President Aaron Mair on why civil rights, fair wages, and environmental justice are all part of ensuring safe neighborhoods—and a sustainable planet.**

**Faith-based communities** have been at the forefront of environmental justice work since the phrase first came into use. In 1987, the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice published the report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. The report—the first of its kind—documented the connection between the siting of hazardous waste sites and the race of the communities where they were located.

For Aaron Mair—an epidemiological-spatial analyst with the New York State Department of Health—environmental justice organizing began in 1984 when he and his family moved to the Arbor Hill neighborhood of Albany, N.Y. The 80-percent-black neighborhood was home to an incinerator that resulted in two of his daughters having upper-respiratory health issues, according to Mair. The neighborhood's toxic air prompted Mair to begin organizing his community to get the incinerator shut down.

In May 2015, Mair was elected as the first African-American president of the Sierra Club, a national environmental organization with more than 800,000 members. Raven Rakia, a freelance journalist and Grist fellow, interviewed Mair for *Sojourners* in February.

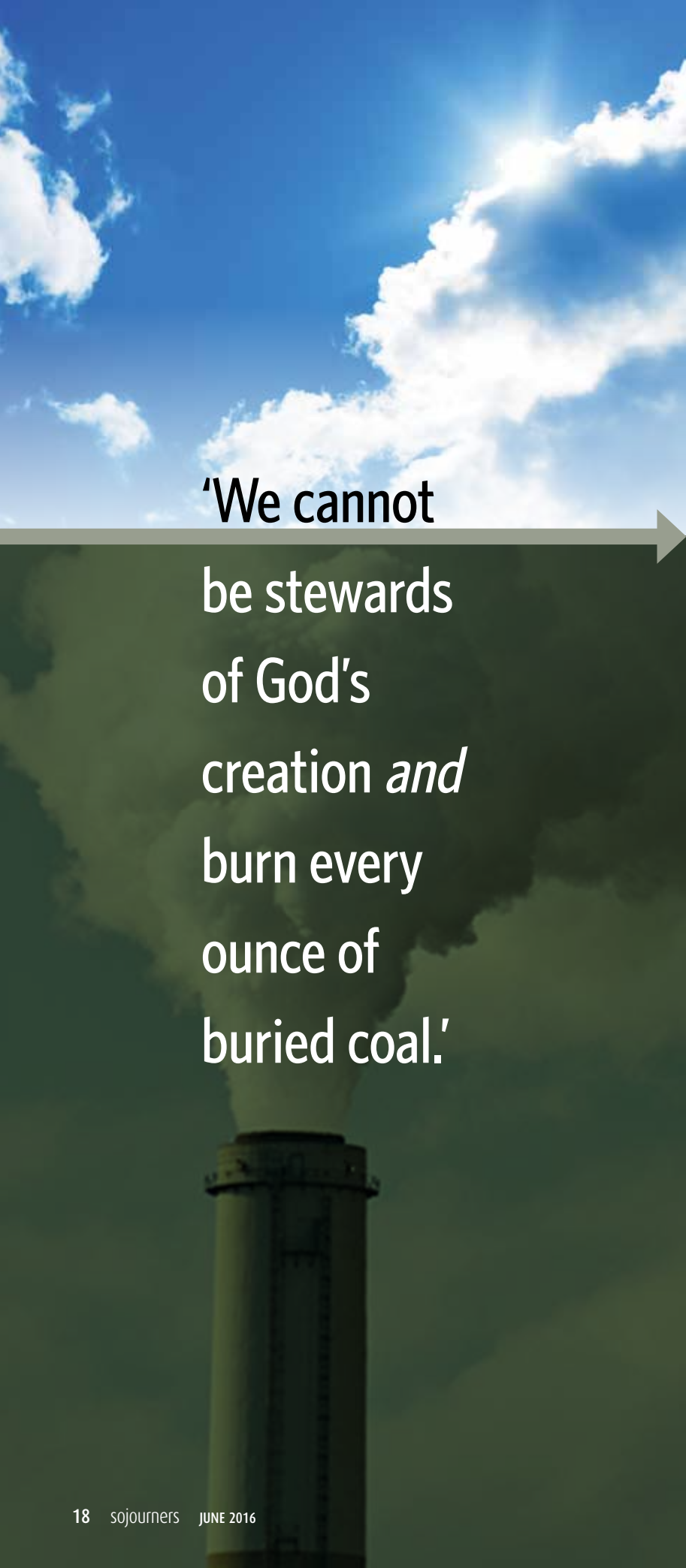


Children play near a petrochemical plant in Texas City, Texas.

Sam Kittner







'We cannot  
be stewards  
of God's  
creation *and*  
burn every  
ounce of  
buried coal.'

**Raven Rakia: What's the significance of your becoming the first black president of the Sierra Club?**

**Aaron Mair:** I didn't start out to make history with the Sierra Club. I started out to make history as an environmental justice activist by elevating the voice of communities of color with regard to equal treatment and protection under the law.

If anything, I was just being a consistent activist, as part of my heritage. I come from a long line of civil rights, voting rights, and union labor rights activists. My father was a union activist and labor shop steward with the United Auto Workers in Tarrytown, N.Y. He was always active with regard to mobilizing and organizing the family, the population, and his mantra was: No matter where you live, as a black man you have to be part of an organization.

**When you were working against the incinerator in your community, your first encounter with Sierra Club was a little less than welcoming. Why did you persevere with that relationship?**

As a low-income minority community, we used the strategies of the civil rights movement—like protesting and boycotting—which led to the incinerator being shut down.

The next level of organizing was about holding the government and the polluters accountable for poisoning the community—once you peel an onion, you have other layers underneath. Once we got rid of this incinerator, the issue of the harm and the legacy of pollution that the incinerator had left behind remained. How do we hold people accountable? Who is going to clean it up? Who's going to deal with the families that are impacted?

Who do you turn to in building that alliance?

While we were initially rebuffed [by Sierra Club staff], activists within the Sierra Club at the immediate grassroots level did not turn their backs on us. The handful that came back to us extended the friendship and, more important, the organizing tools that helped us build a grassroots environmental justice organization.

When Dr. King was in jail in



Birmingham, Ala., mainstream Christian organizations were telling him to chill out because there were other priorities and there was “a better way.” Then he wrote the letter from jail and swayed a lot of those Christian voices to come back and build solidarity. Our appeal from the “environmental justice jail” touched enough activists working with the Sierra Club, so that even though we did not have the formal organizational support, we did have local grassroots activist support, and that was pivotal in our fight against the incinerator.

Joining the Sierra Club [in 1999] was a logical strategic choice because they had the technology and the grassroots infrastructure to support us. Even more important, they had the capacity to change.

Sierra Club



Sierra Club President Aaron Mair was one of 1,400 people arrested at the U.S. Capitol in April to defend voting rights and protest undue political influence by the wealthy.

### Why is it vital to engage people of color in work against climate change?

First of all, climate change is *the* 21st century issue. Right now, the argument in question is about species' survival as the globe goes through this transformation due to anthropogenic impacts on the climate through burning fossil fuels. At the end of the day, whether it's in the United States or in developing nations, especially in many coastal and island communities, we tend to be on the front lines. Many of the old, industrial areas of most nation states are on the coastal waterways. The large shipping ports are where the affordable housing, low-income housing,

and public housing were often built. Therefore, mostly people of color live in those areas.

These communities also happen to be the places where they have the coal power plants or the coal ash ponds. So these communities are not only on the front lines of climate change, they're also on the front lines of source pollution. The toxins are being burned, dumped, and disposed of in their back and front yards.

This is not some sort of distant reality for communities of color. They're experiencing health problems in real time.

In order even to try to have a clean economy, we must have a decent living wage and gainful employment. If we're going to be building the clean energy and clean technology that will liberate us and provide better health outcomes, we should not be settling for climate capitalists—this whole new sector industry that's now coming in and pirating the moral crusade to save humanity. We have to be vigilant on two fronts: We must stop the combustion and burning of dirty fossil fuels, but we also must be part of the just transition where our people are treated fairly and are employed in that 100-percent clean-energy future.

## 'While we were

initially rebuffed, activists within the Sierra Club at the grassroots level did not turn their backs on us. They extended the friendship and the organizing tools that helped us build a grassroots environmental justice organization.'



**'We must  
all engage;  
we must  
all be in  
the game.'**

Here's why we need to have strong partnership with the NAACP and labor unions: If we don't have our people registered and empowered to vote, those policy decisions that are detailing the rules and regulations for the clean energy future will be dismantled. We also need to have a hand in those solutions that will provide us new economic opportunities. Because the big money in politics that is undermining our democracy and profiting from putting us as canaries in the coal mine today will basically make us indentured servants to the production of the new clean-energy future tomorrow. We have to be vigilant.

**What has been your engagement with the faith community when it comes to environmental justice?**

My faith and my family's faith guides me tremendously regarding our mission and our duty to protect our air, land, and water—but more important, all humanity in all God's creation. I am the son and descendant of sharecroppers whose family still owns their land in a place called Travelers Rest in Greenville County, S.C. We never broke our link to the land, and we never broke our link to our family church: the Golden Grove Baptist Church in Travelers Rest.

The values of the book Genesis—of humanity's role in protecting creation and protecting one another—has been part of my family's religious creed. This particular book and this particular aspect of our life and our existence were critical in my formation. The book of Genesis points to people being stewards of God's creation, and we cannot be stewards of God's creation if we're talking about burning every ounce of buried coal. If our role on earth is to be good stewards and to protect this planet, then right now we're doing a very sorry job.

**Where do you see faith-based groups and faith communities in the history of environmental justice?**

When we talk about Dr. King and his assassination in Memphis, the critical point was that he was there at a [sanitation workers] strike, recognizing that men and women had a right to be respected as labor, to provide for their families. Few people know that

that particular sanitation department in Memphis worked around one of the nation's oldest and largest Superfund sites because they were dumping toxins and pesticides. These men were not only fighting for a living wage, but they were fighting for decent, humane conditions. King's death was at the pinnacle of a labor rights and environmental rights struggle.

Labor, environment, civil rights—all these rights are tied together and allow us to live in a clean, sustainable, and healthy environment with decent, living wages and decent education. King recognized that. Society tries to distill him down to "I Have a Dream." The man wasn't dreaming. He said: I have rights. He didn't die for a dream. He died trying to get us our basic equal rights and protection under the law.

**Are we at a political turning point when it comes to climate change—given the EPA's clean power plan and the talks in Paris?**

Paris was the globe coming together and bearing witness that climate change is real and it's caused by humans, and we have a chance of saving the human species and all species on the planet. The clean power plan, while imperfect, is a very significant step. But it needs to be made better. And we cannot do that by relying exclusively upon the president of the United States. We must all engage; we must all be in the game. Look at how people are being treated over water [in places such as Detroit, Flint, and Baltimore]; that can tell you what's going to happen to black people under any condition.

Every church, every school, every institution, every scout troop, every choir—if you are trying to sing praise of God, planet, and community, you must be engaged in this movement.

The critical thing right now is that we all need to move beyond our silos. The church, by itself, is a silo. The environmental movement, in some areas, has become a silo. The environmental justice movement has become a silo. The labor movement has become a silo. We must now leave those silos behind and come to a common space to organize and strategize so that we can elevate our human condition. ■

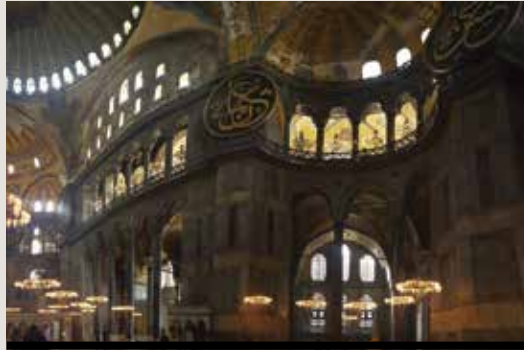


## Making Room for Delight

**I RECENTLY MADE** the mistake of taking an extended trip to my favorite city. Istanbul is a rambunctious sprawl of cultures and histories—catnip for a writer, as I am, and for a college student, as I was on my first visit nine years ago.

Chief among Istanbul's delights is the Hagia Sophia, first basilica, then mosque, then museum—part architectural wonder, part historical jigsaw puzzle. Above the ochre-domed great hall is the famous juxtaposition: a gilded mosaic of Mary and the Christ Child flanked by two enormous placards in Arabic script—the names Allah and Muhammad. The effect is somehow both solemn and conspiratorial, as if some divine negotiation has happened behind the scenes.

Hagia Sophia means “holy wisdom,” and to enter into its hushed halls, a thin winter light stretching its way across 1,500-year-old pillars to twinkle through heavy chandeliers, is to enter a palpable mystery. It is con-



The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

The Hagia Sophia is no different. It has stood since 537, an unimaginably long time—and perhaps its cozy relationship with power, as much as its beauty, cements its continued existence: The Great Schism between Catholic and Orthodox churches began in its halls. Its meaning was looted and converted in the name of empire. It is now a secular museum, profiting from foreign tourism while under legal fights from Muslim and Christian groups as to its rightful identity.

The burden of knowledge can cripple hope, and those who work for justice talk often of self-care for the soul. It wasn't until I stood in the doorway of my favorite building on earth, and felt my heart utterly fail to leap that I realized the degree of the risk. In a complicated world, one in which every system we participate in is complicit, how do we make room for delight?

DELIGHT IS A whimsical word, seemingly too soft for use in the serious work of justice. We are in a corroded age, jaded from corrupt systems and election cycles and broken people at the helms of broken institutions. Is joy not a betrayal of everyone who remains wounded? What practical value is added by delight?

I think one answer may be found in how we think about

the work of building. “The human mind takes apart with its analytic habits of reasoning, but the human heart puts things together because it loves them,” wrote philosopher and architect Keith Critchlow.

Every edifice of modern life—

familial, agrarian, institutional, structural—carries a complicated history, shot through, at some point, with repugnant or downright evil elements.

But we are tied to each of these institutions, also, by affection. And in this love for what can be pulled together from it—even if not what is, or what was—lies redemption.

For writers, as for Christians, our business is to tell the truth. To do so we must start with what is loved. I wonder whether beginning with delight, before we tear apart and analyze, can help us more clearly imagine the possibilities of these systems as their best selves. And whether by doing so, we might navigate to a more perfect redemption.

I stood under the rosy arches of the Hagia Sophia twice in January: first with a Christian friend, then with a Muslim one. Their sharp intakes of breath, identically awed, reminded me of what I knew first about the Hagia Sophia before I tore it down in my own heart: Mystery and delight are at work in the world. The very stones will cry it out.

Every institution and system in which we participate is complicated. We do not have to kill what makes our hearts leap. ■

*Catherine Woodiwiss is Sojourners' senior associate web editor.*



Is joy not a betrayal, I wondered, of everyone who remains wounded?

stitutionally impossible to behold the Hagia Sophia for the first time and not feel a stirring in the soul.

But this was my second time. After eight years of living in Washington, D.C., and working for social justice, I was carrying with me a very different posture toward the world—a suspicion of appearances, a stubbornness to accept grand narrative. I have learned much more about the world and the many ways it fails us since my first glimpse of a shimmering Istanbul. I've written about systems that rely on marginalization and the politically convenient, and I've felt, deeply and insistently, all the ways the world has grown more threatening for the most vulnerable.







# Holy Rollers



Seeking the welfare of the city,  
for some pastors, includes ministry  
to two-wheelers • by STEVE HOLT

**A BEEPING, BUSTLING** Boston intersection is a strange place for a sanctuary, but on a blustery August evening, the corner of Beacon Street and Massachusetts Avenue becomes just that.

"This is holy ground," says Rev. Laura Everett to several dozen people who form a semicircle around her and a lily-white bicycle chained to a concrete pole. Flowers overflow from the bike's front basket.

"We're here to dedicate this ghost bike," Everett tells the growing crowd, "a visible sign of an invisible reality—that we're fragile humans, and we're only here for a little while."

Everett, clad in religious vestments, and the crowd around her, wearing bike helmets and messenger bags, are installing the "ghost bike" as a memorial to 38-year-old cyclist Anita Kurmann, a beloved endocrine surgeon in the city, who was killed 13 days earlier when she was struck by a flatbed truck. A cyclist reads Psalm 23 into a megaphone and another reads a letter from Kurmann's lab supervisor before Everett leads the congregation in a simple call-and-response prayer.

"When we choose to take a bike instead of a car," Everett prays, "when we choose to listen instead of shout, when we choose advocacy instead of complacency, when we choose to get curious instead of cranky, when we choose to heal a broken world instead of cursing it, when we travel past this spot, remind us of Anita."

"Holy One," the crowd responds, some with eyes clenched shut, "hear our prayer."

It's a remarkable thing to witness (even on YouTube months later): a Christian minister leading a wildly diverse

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community of cyclists in prayer and lament for a fallen sister, and for each other. Her bike ministry extends beyond presiding over ghost bike ceremonies, though. Everett—a United Church of Christ minister and executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches—leads a “blessing of the bikes” each May where she prays for cyclists’ safety and anoints dozens of sets of wheels with chain lube. And as a four-season commuter cyclist herself who’s officiated three ghost bike ceremonies for fellow cyclists in a little over a year, she’s become a fierce advocate for transportation infrastructure that respects and protects cyclists.

Everett is just one of a handful of ministers across the nation—from New York City to Minneapolis to Denver—whose parish extends outside of traditional church structures to include bike lanes and cyclists. She says cyclists know the risks of the road and yet choose to bicycle—“a rule of life that many pastors would give their right arm for.”

“These are people who have said, ‘There’s an easier path, but I’m going to do this,’” she says. “That’s remarkable.”



#### **A two-wheeled evangelist**

With just shy of 4 percent of its population consistently choosing two wheels instead of four, Minneapolis is, according to data compiled by the League of American Bicyclists, one of the most bike-friendly cities in America. This is the context in which Rev. Travis Norvell found himself upon arriving in South Minneapolis in 2012 to pastor the Judson Memorial Baptist Church, a congregation of between 150 and 200 people.

But in fact it was Norvell’s adolescent daughter who finally convinced him to join the ranks of the city’s bicycling commuters. It was January 2014, and Norvell had just preached a sermon about the congregation’s historical response to some of the social evils of the early 20th century, concluding with a challenge to today’s parishioners to “do their part ... to love the world into a new existence.” The call to action especially touched Seneca Norvell, age 12 at the time, who turned her father’s sermon back around on him: “Dad, when are *you* going to make this a reality?”

Norvell was convicted; how could he preach to his congregation about sacrifice for the greater good and remain unwilling to give up his car? So he called a family meeting, and the family decided to ditch their car and begin biking and utilizing public



transportation. Four days after that fateful sermon and daughterly admonishment—and despite subzero temperatures and snow piled high—Norvell sold the family car, put winter tires on his bike, and began cycling to the church office and pastoral appointments. He was particularly compelled by the environmental implications of biking instead of driving, and said the change “gave me a personal sense that I’m not helpless in this—that personal actions do matter.”

As Norvell settled into his newfound identity as an urban cyclist, his congregation supported him. When he worried about being able to get out to a nursing home visit in the suburbs, a parishioner offered him a ride. When faced with the mental hurdle of braving a Minneapolis winter on two wheels—temperatures often plummeted into the negative double-digits in 2014—a seasoned rider slapped him on the back and offered a word of encouragement. And when Norvell showed up at a church meeting covered in snow, parishioners “didn’t chuckle; they showed grace.”

**A “ghost bike” memorial to a biker killed while riding.**







## Rev. Laura Everett prays for cyclists' safety and anoints dozens of sets of wheels with chain lube.

"hemming and hawing" through his ask, nervous about insulting the church leadership.

But the leaders weren't insulted. Originally, Goldstein suggested doing the blessing outside on a loading dock, but the ministers suggested inviting cyclists inside the 124-foot-high cathedral sanctuary. "Do you want us to sprinkle the bikes with holy water?" he remembers a church official asking him, to which he responded, "Can we do that?"

That first blessing, in May 1999, drew more than 100 cyclists. Eighteen years later, as many as 300 cyclists, ranging from hard-core racers to families with children, line up with their bikes on the cathedral floor each year, eager to be blessed. They come from all over the country, as the blessing is typically scheduled for the day before the Five Boro Bike Tour, the city's largest bike ride. And like the blessing's founder, attendees also come from a variety of faith traditions or claim no faith at all, says Rev. Julia Whitworth, canon for liturgy and the arts at St. John the Divine, who has designed and read the short liturgy at the ceremony the last four years.

"Cathedral of St. John the Divine is founded to be not just an Episcopal church but a house of prayer for all people," she says. "This is one of the times during the year that we really get to be that."

For Goldstein, the highlight of the event every year is an unusual moment following the pronunciation of a blessing over the cyclists. As bicycles are sprinkled with holy water, the riders begin to ring their bike bells, creating a symphony that echoes through the cathedral—as close to a spiritual experience as Goldstein can imagine.

"Whatever you believe in, there's something happening in that moment," he says. "Call it what you want; that is not like being anywhere else."

### Bike bell symphonies

The idea of a bicycle blessing, however, did not originate with Norvell—or anyone in the church, for that matter.

In 1999, New York City bike ride organizer Glen Goldstein noticed that the disparate groups within the city's cycling community—racers, messengers, commuters—rarely crossed paths. So Goldstein, a non-practicing Jew, approached leaders of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine about whether they might be interested in organizing a bike blessing. Having never heard of such a thing before—not to mention being Jewish—Goldstein remembers

### "Seek the welfare of the city"

Mere inches separate urban cyclists from 2,000-pound cars driving down narrow Boston streets or box trucks in New York stopping short to avoid a pothole. Even when a cyclist is doing everything right—occupying the full lane, wearing a protective helmet and reflective clothing, signaling correctly—a collision between a motor vehicle and a bicycle almost always results in the cyclist taking the brunt of the damage. Between 1998 and 2013, hospital admissions due to bicycle injuries more than doubled as more Americans than ever were cycling, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. This is why Rev. Laura Everett believes cyclists are more uniquely aware of their mortality than most people—and also why risk and death are subjects that run through many bicycle ministries.



Hope Central Church photo





Everett points to both the size and visible emotion of the crowd of cyclists who showed up at the first ghost bike ceremony she officiated. The ceremony was for Marcia Deihl, a 65-year-old Cambridge, Mass. activist who was killed as she biked to Whole Foods in March 2015. After the service was over, Everett checked in with a woman she'd seen openly crying and asked the woman how she knew Marcia.

"I didn't know her," the woman answered, adding, "I'm a cyclist. That could have been me."

In the face of death, the cycling community needs to "connect and grieve to move forward," says Becca Wolfson, interim director of the Boston Cyclists' Union. Attaching slightly more religious language, Everett says ghost bike ceremonies are "public lament."

As cyclist and activist Jonathan Fertig prepared and painted Anita Kurmann's ghost bike, he says he was moved to tears by the idea of a fellow cyclist doing the same for him were he to die while riding. Fertig, who describes his religious status as "somewhere between agnostic and atheist," says he appreciates the way Everett's words are always "very inclusive" and "not off-putting." Wolfson, herself a non-practicing Jew, says Everett always brings a thread of advocacy and social justice into the events she leads, like her words in front of the Massachusetts State House in November for the Global Day of Remembrance, which commemorates lives lost in traffic accidents.

"She can create that compelling story through her sermons and words, both healing

and calling for action," Wolfson says.

Bicycling has become central to the person Everett is as a Christian, and she has even written a book about urban spirituality and cycling, forthcoming from Eerdmans. She models her ministry after that of Jesus, who "traveled to the people, chatted along the side of the road, interacted with surprising people who crossed his path—people he would never have met if he had stayed in clearly defined religious spaces."

But it was in the streets, perched atop her bicycle with a "Clergy" sign affixed to her rear rack, where Everett says she became a Bostonian and learned to love and advocate for her city.

"I think a lot about Jeremiah 29:7: 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare,'" she says. "My welfare is intimately connected to the welfare of the city. And I can't pray to the Lord on the city's behalf unless I know the city intimately and tenderly.

"Riding my bicycle through the city has helped me love this place and deepen my prayers for this particular city." ■

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**Steve Holt** (@thebostonwriter) covers a number of topics for local and national publications. His story about healthy fast-food burgers in Boston was included in the Best Food Writing 2011 anthology. Read more at [thebostonwriter.com](http://thebostonwriter.com)

## Sharing the Road

**IN 2012**, the U.S. Census reported that 786,000 Americans use a bike to get to work—up almost 300,000 from 2000. So, who's riding all these bikes? While white people (primarily men) make 77 percent of bike trips, biking rates are rising fastest among Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans.

**NATIONALITY:** Immigrants are twice as likely to travel by bicycle than native-born Americans.

**RACE:** 23 percent of bike trips are by African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans—up 7 percent between 2001 and 2009.

**EDUCATION:** People who did *not* graduate high school are the second-highest population of bikers, following people with graduate and professional degrees.

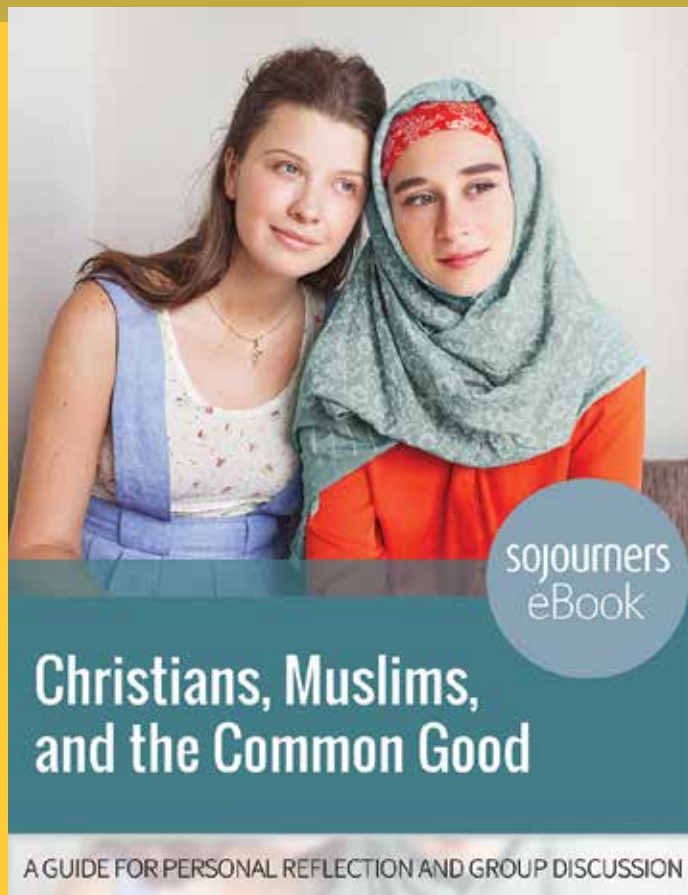
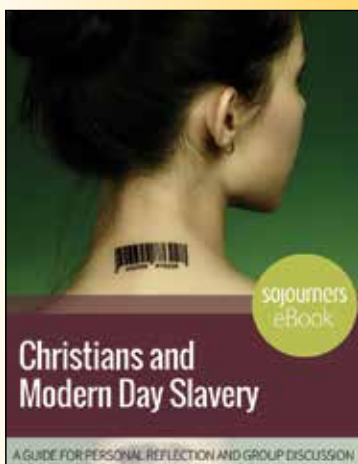
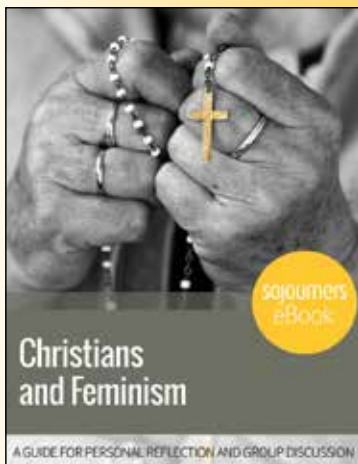
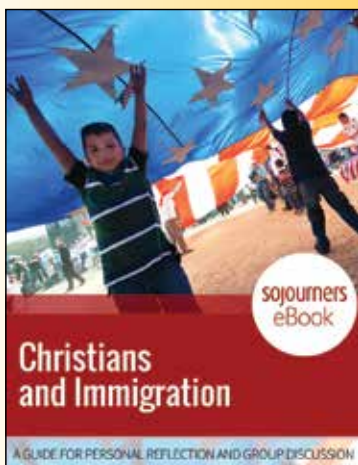
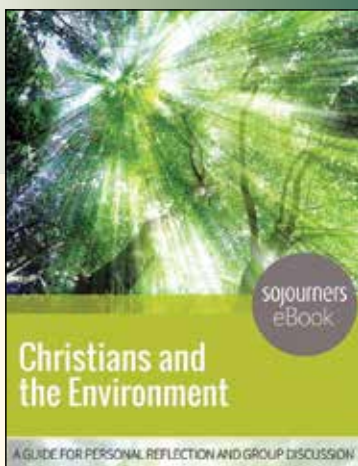
**AGE:** 27.7 percent of Latino children (age 5 to 18) bike or walk to school—the highest rate among racial or ethnic groups.

**INCOME:** People in households with lower incomes are more likely to bike to work (as opposed to biking for recreation or exercise) than people in households with greater incomes—40 percent of adult bike riders earn \$20,000 or less, according to the advocacy group PeopleForBikes. —**Compiled by Caroline Barnett**



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# A Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim walk into a parking lot...

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**...and end up building a shared campus for all three places of worship.**

by **DAWN ARAUJO-HAWKINS**

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**I**n fall 1884, the congregation that became Temple Israel opened its doors as the first Jewish synagogue in the state of Nebraska. From its inception, Temple Israel was a Reform congregation, a theologically progressive denomination that stresses the social justice imperatives of Judaism. Yet the early members of Temple Israel included not just Reform Jews, but Conservative and Orthodox Jews as well; navigating these interdenominational relationships would prove to be a significant part of the congregation's early development.

Fast forward 130 years and Temple Israel is one of three houses of worship embarking on a unique interfaith partnership: a single campus in west Omaha that will house a Jewish synagogue, a Muslim mosque, a Christian church, and a fourth building for interfaith fellowship.

Aryeh Azriel, Temple Israel's senior rabbi, planted the seeds for this project, known as the Tri-Faith Initiative, in 2006 when he reached out to the American Muslim Institute, another local religious community that was looking to construct a new building.

"The original idea started as a result of looking for a partnership in sharing parking lots," Azriel told *Sojourners*.

The two communities had forged a relationship in 2001 when, following the Sept. 11 attacks, Azriel led members of Temple Israel in encircling a local mosque to protect it from the Islamophobic attacks they were seeing in the national news.

Syed Mohiuddin, president of the American Muslim Institute, agreed to the partnership; he liked the idea of the two religious groups sharing a parking lot with each other rather than with retail stores or other commercial development. However, it didn't take long for the two communities to realize the project had greater potential than a shared parking lot. If they could find Christians willing to join them, they could build a shared campus for all three Abrahamic faiths, the first such campus in the world—at least to their knowledge.

"The more we talked about it, the more we thought this was an opportunity of a lifetime," Mohiuddin said. "We could share the things that are common among us, the things that are different, and we could learn to appreciate the beauty of each religion."

## **Not "watered down" faith**

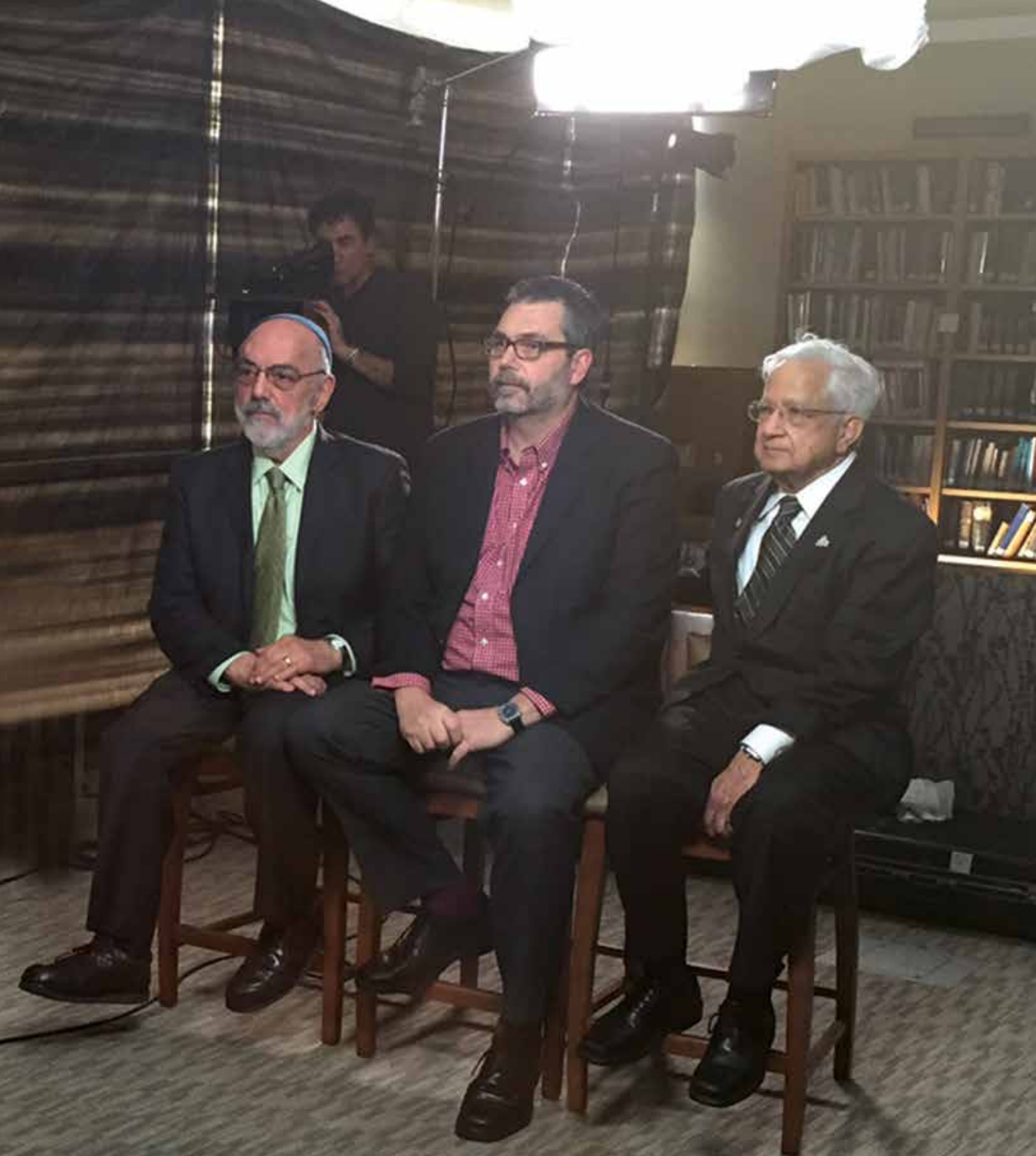
In December 2011, after looking at 32 plots of land, Temple Israel, the American Muslim Institute, and the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska—the Christian partner—purchased the grounds of a recently closed Jewish country club; two years later, the synagogue was completed. The original plan had been to finish the mosque by 2015; however, in 2013, citing time and cost challenges, the Episcopalians pulled out of the project. The search for a new Christian partner brought construction plans to a halt.

In spring 2015, Countryside Community Church, a United Church of Christ congregation, became the new Christian partner, and with plans moving forward, Mohiuddin said he expects the



Photo by Susan Clement-Toberer





Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, Rev. Eric Elnes, and Dr. Syed Mohiuddin on the set of *The Daily Show* discussing Omaha's Tri-Faith Initiative. Correspondent Ronny Chieng said, "I guess if a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim can walk into a bar, and it's not a joke, and they don't kill each other, maybe there is hope for peace in the Middle East ... of America."

# 'This is something that God always

Photos from recent gatherings of Tri-Faith members.



denominationally and gender-inclusive mosque to be completed by the end of the year. Countryside, meanwhile, has only recently embarked on a capital campaign for their new building and has yet to break ground. All three houses of worship, plus the fourth communal building, are expected to be up and running by 2018.

"When you build something so unique and momentous, it takes years," said Azriel.

But if there's one thing the Tri-Faith Initiative partners want to make clear it's that they aren't trying to create a single, coalesced religion. While the Tri-Faith Initiative board helps govern the overall project, each faith community maintains sole responsibility for its own building and worship. After all, the point of the project is to promote interfaith community and that can't happen, the partners say, if the communities aren't living their faith authentically.

"None of the three faiths are being asked to water down their faith," said Eric Elnes, senior minister at Countryside Community Church. "We're actually all expected to come out of this full-blooded Christians, full-blooded Jews, full-blooded Muslims."

## Beyond "being nice"

And that's meant that the three faith communities have had to grapple with difficult questions and the challenging ideas in their respective holy scriptures. For example, what are the implications of believing that Abraham's rejected son, Ishmael, is the spiritual father of all Muslims? Or how can Christians, Muslims, and Jews grapple with

the seemingly disparaging ways their holy texts describe other faith groups? It hasn't always been easy, but so far, no one has seemed interested in giving up.

"There's nothing more boring than an interfaith dialogue where everybody's just simply trying to be nice," Elnes said.

Wendy Goldberg, a Tri-Faith Initiative board member and a former president of Temple Israel, agrees. "Most interfaith conversations are looking for those places of sameness," she said. "In the Tri-Faith Initiative, we're looking to acknowledge that we are different, and that we cannot just tolerate but respect and trust and accept that there other ways to know God."

Goldberg said she views the Tri-Faith Initiative as an important generational innovation. Her parents, who lived through the time of the Holocaust and were all-too-familiar with anti-Semitism, grew up in a religious community that mostly kept to itself—a coping mechanism that allowed people in marginalized communities to support one another. Goldberg's children, however, have grown up in the internet age, with nearly instant access to millions of religious thought leaders and all kinds of religious texts. Given that environment, said Goldberg, it would be ridiculous to try and tell them there's only one place to find truth about God.

"Balancing that place between those generations has been enlightening for me," Goldberg said. "I'm not saying there isn't value in supporting your own people—it's the same in philanthropy, you know? You support Jewish causes because who else would, right? But in order to not live in that ghetto

mentality of Jews only belonging in one place, we have to be more open and accepting that people are going to think differently than us."

## "You can't get away from each other"

Even without a completed campus, the Tri-Faith community has already taken to its mission of getting to know one another. A robust children's program offering interfaith playtime for younger children and leadership development for teenagers is already operating, and the communities share meals together at public picnics and in each other's homes. And, of course, there are already plans for a joint interfaith education program; one of the things that's been most

surprising to many involved with the Tri-Faith Initiative is just how little people know about faith traditions outside of their own. And those observations are backed up by research: Five years ago, the Pew Research Center polled religious literacy in the United States and found that the average American adult could only correctly answer 50 percent of their questions about world religions.

And while religious literacy remains important, the ultimate goal of the initiative is to move beyond dialogue into the real, gritty work of interfaith understanding—something that a shared campus will hopefully encourage. Typically, interfaith dialogue involves going to a lecture with a lot of other people, explained Mohiuddin. "They talk, then they go home, and they probably don't see each other for a long time," he said. "On this campus, you can't get away from each other. You are there."





# wanted us to do.'



28 years, and he thinks the Midwest is the perfect place for an undertaking of this magnitude.

"I think you can do things in Omaha quietly, without the news arriving too early," he said, pointing out the failed attempt in 2010 to build an Islamic cultural center in New York City. Inappropriately dubbed the "Ground Zero mosque," the plans drew heavy criticism from those who thought the cultural center was an affront to the victims of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and a sign of the "Islamicization" of the United States. The cultural center was scrapped, and now it appears that luxury condos will go up in its place.

"Being in the Midwest allows all of us to work harder here without the front page articles, without CNN, without news media that sometimes diminishes the intentionality of the project," Azriel said, which is not to suggest that the Tri-Faith Initiative doesn't welcome media attention.

"Right now, we're a garden of one in the world," said Eric Elnes, laughing. "But we're hoping that in coming years, we'll be one of 200 tri-faith initiatives or even more. We're hoping not to be unique, and we're hoping that one way we can help others is to talk about our experiences—where the pressure points are and how you work through them."

So far, Elnes says he's only heard of two projects inspired by the Tri-Faith Initiative: the House of One in Berlin—which is currently crowdsourcing funds to build a single house of worship for Jews, Muslims, and Christians—and a group in Bentonville, Ark., that's in the early stages of exploring its options.

Aryeh Azriel said he would love to support other tri-faith initiatives, even emphatically suggesting that anyone interested in doing something similar call the group in Omaha. However, he said, this project isn't ultimately about providing a model of interfaith community for the world.

"I just want to make sure that we do right with God," he said. "This is definitely not for our own egos—this is something that God always wanted us to do. And I think we are doing justice to what God requires of us." ■

*Dawn Araujo-Hawkins (@dawn\_cherie), a former Sojourners editorial assistant, is a staff writer for the Global Sisters Report in Kansas City, Mo.*

The thought is that on the Tri-Faith Initiative campus, when Jews see Muslims praying on a regular basis or when Christians know what is happening in a synagogue, fear and misunderstanding of the other will dissipate.

Mohiuddin said there has been nominal pushback from some members of the broader Omaha community, but he said he doesn't consider it to be a "real obstructive force." Aryeh Azriel says, so far, he's overjoyed at how heartily this vision has been accepted by those involved.

This vision has seemed all the more important in a time when blatant Islamophobia in the United States goes seemingly unchecked. For example, last fall, dozens of governors across the country vocally opposed plans to resettle Syrian refugees in their states—this despite the fact that Syria has been embroiled a long civil war that, at that point, had already killed hundreds of thousands of people, half of them civilians.

Nebraska's Pete Ricketts was one of the governors refusing to resettle refugees, citing the "reach and strength" of ISIS as the primary hesitation.

Jennifer Hamann, moderator of Countryside Community Church, called Rickett's position painful. Before Countryside joined the Tri-Faith Initiative, Hamann had Jewish friends, but she hadn't known any Muslims—now she says her new friendships have opened her eyes to the discrimination Muslims face on a daily basis, and it breaks her heart.

"I have friends who have to explain to their children that, even though they're



**A schematic shows the proposed campus, with separate Christian, Muslim, and Jewish houses of worship and a shared community building in the center.**

Muslims, they're not bad people," Hamann said. "How long do we have to keep fighting and have misunderstanding over religion? I get chills when I talk about this, but the Tri-Faith Initiative is a statement: Let's conquer this with peace and love."

Conquering hate with peace and love is Aryeh Azriel's goal too. It was only about 100 years ago that Jews were one of the primary targets of violence and hate in the United States, and the Jewish community still carries those agonizing memories of being betrayed, chased, and marginalized, he said. Azriel believes that's part of what drives Temple Israel to promote peace and mutual understanding today.

"It is time to shut completely the language and the spirit of bigotry and racism in this country," he said.

## Midwest is best

If anyone is surprised that such an ambitious movement is coming out of Omaha, Azriel thinks they shouldn't be. Originally from Tel Aviv, Azriel himself has lived in Omaha for

Naomi Mwangi  
wanted something  
different—she  
wanted to be a  
peace activist.



Kenyan activist Naomi  
Mwangi speaks at the  
2015 Global Youth Peace  
Summit in Texas.



# Making Peace in a Powder Keg

**Kenya is home to 70 languages, 42 ethnic groups, and at least one terrorist organization. Young peace activists are bridging these differences, one issue at a time • by JULIENNE GAGE**

**IN DECEMBER 2007**, Naomi Mwangi, a Christian, fled her home in Kisumu, Kenya, as men with machetes attacked towns across the region. For five weeks violence raged nationwide. When the bloodshed ended, more than 1,300 Kenyans were dead and another 650,000 had been displaced. Mwangi and her family ended up living in the Maai Mahiu refugee camp, south of Nairobi. She was 12 years old.

Mwangi is coming of age in a society with ethnic violence in the background, extremist violence in the foreground, and massive economic inequality. Africa has the highest concentration of young people in the world and more than half of them are unemployed. Mwangi wanted something different—she wanted to work for peace.

Now 21, Mwangi is a leader in grassroots peace-making campaigns that seek to end conflicts between the 42 ethnic groups in this majority-Christian country. The 2007 election violence pitted Christian against Christian, as ethnic ties trumped religious affiliation. Even now, during elections, Mwangi told *Sojourners*, “Leaders motivate youth to join in the political crisis ... to fight against another tribe.”

A major obstacle to social and economic stability among youth in Kenya is unequal distribution of government-issued identification cards. Kenyans need ID cards for everything from voting and university enrollment to obtaining grants for entrepreneurship programs. But historically, the ruling government doled them out as political favors, and they’ve often been denied to members of minority groups.

“There are plenty of applications at election time,” Mwangi said, explaining that the ID process is slowed down or delayed when it seems one ethnic group could tip the chances of a politician who represents a different group.

Mwangi was lucky. Even though her family fled its home in Kisumu, she was able to obtain her identification card through a United Nations-sponsored civic engagement campaign in the refugee camp.

## Muslim youth in Kenya

But Muslim minority youth are not as fortunate. Muslims make up just 10 percent of Kenya’s population, which also includes Hindus, Baha’is, and people of Indigenous religions, and they have often borne

the brunt of the unequal distribution of power in the country.

Because many in the Muslim community circulate along the Kenya’s porous northern borders, the government contends that it doesn’t know the difference between a Kenyan Muslim and one from neighboring Somalia, South Sudan, or Ethiopia. Using this excuse, the Kenyan government requires these residents to produce birth certificates all the way back to grandparents. The inequity is compounded by common fears that Muslim youth may be sympathetic to militant extremists groups, such as the al Qaeda-affiliated al Shabaab.

Of course, this is a vicious cycle. Religious leaders acknowledge that Muslim youth who feel powerless to change their situation *have* been known to join in terrorist activities.

In recent years, religious conflict, fomented by al Shabaab, has overshadowed traditional ethnic divisions. The group claimed responsibility for the 2013 attacks on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, which killed 67 people and wounded 175, and for a 2015 attack at Garissa University College, a Christian school, in which 147 people died and 79 were injured. Many experts consider these activities reprisal for Kenya’s military intervention in Somalia. In late 2011, the Kenyan and Somali militaries joined forces in Somali conflict zones to attack al Shabaab after its members kidnapped several foreigners in Kenya. Today, Kenya contributes about 4,000 troops to a 22,000-strong African Union military force in Somalia.

“The patterns of [al Shabaab] attacks appear to be aimed at inciting interreligious conflict and stoking the flames of animosity and bitterness,” said Francis Kuria Kageema, a Roman Catholic who serves as executive director of the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, the country’s largest coalition of mainline Christian, Muslim, and Hindu institutions.

“The whole issue of radicalization of youths and extremism has the potential of exacerbating an already-fragile security situation and placing extra burden on a stretched national security apparatus,” said Kuria.

Getting better representation of Muslims would likely curb these trends. In 2012, the Kenyan Muslim

Youth Alliance (KMYA), an affiliate of the Inter-Religious Council, successfully lobbied the government to start sending out mobile ID centers. Progress has been made, but it is still slow.

### Understanding sacred values

In December, the Inter-Religious Council and the Youth Alliance held an interfaith camp at mosques and churches in the predominantly Muslim port city of Mombasa. For many youth, it was the first time they'd ever stepped inside the place of worship of another religion. It became an opportunity to explore their common struggles in a hotly contested region of the country.

Because of land grievances and ethnic favoritism among Kenya's most powerful groups, the Mombasa region's native population—which includes Muslims, Christians, and Hindus—has not always reaped the benefits of its port activity, oil refinery, and multimillion-dollar tourism industry. The camp concluded with a graduation ceremony in which youth vowed to make peace along Kenya's coast.

Much of the council's work comes down to “understanding the sacred values that fuse and motivate devoted militants to extreme actions and reframing or leveraging them to diffuse violence,” said Kuria. “What we're doing is creating counternarratives.”

But peacemakers are also forced to respond reactively in impromptu community forums in the wake of an act of terror.

“When those things happen, there is outrage from the community, so we try to bring the community and government together for this kind of dialogue,” explained KMYA executive director Abdulhamid Sakar, a 38-year-old Muslim from western Kenya.

And when the Youth Alliance is unable to organize forums, the group stays abreast of fundamentalist activity by tracking social media. Islamia TV Kenya broadcasts regular discussions of peaceful understanding of religious texts, and the alliance does the same through its Facebook account. These activists also try to engage fundamentalist sympathizers by posting alternative messaging on websites that promote extremist Muslim ideology.

“You find that some of them won't continue to comment because of their lack of knowledge about the ideology,” noted Sakar.



Naomi Mwangi dances with another activist at the 2013 Global Youth Peace Summit.

Some of those commentators, Sakar said, have migrated over to reading and commenting on KMYA's Facebook site. These types of efforts are also supported by Muslim mothers who alert community leaders to early warning signs of fundamentalist thinking in their children by keeping watch on their smart phone activity to see who they're communicating with on social media.

“A lot of the [extremist] recruitment is done by what we call grievance politics,” said Kuria. “At the grassroots level, people see that they have been neglected, they have not been engaged, and that they are not likely to change the scenarios and their livelihoods using normal socio-political processes. Reports have described how radical clerics and small circles of dedicated followers lure local youths of poor marginalized communities by offering a sense of belonging, a compelling worldview, and a small stipend, with the promise of more, to join al Shabaab's cause by taking up arms in Somalia and Kenya.”

But most violence in Kenya, whether ethnic or religious, stems from decades of anger over limited resources and power imbalances, leaving underrepresented peoples more vulnerable to criminal and fundamentalist behavior. But there have been some recent promising developments. Following the 2007 election violence, the two presidential candidates agreed to a power-sharing deal arrangement that provides more balanced ethnic representation at the federal level. In 2012, the country's various factions agreed to reform the constitution to give more power to local governments. Peace activists working to end conflict in Kenya say these changes give Kenya's diverse ethnic and religious groups a chance to view themselves and each other differently.

### Rites of passage

Kenya's population—now 44 million and projected to reach 76 million by 2045—is

among the fastest-growing in the world, which creates a heavy burden on its land use. Additionally, almost three-quarters of the Kenyan population is under age 30, and 70 percent of them are unemployed. For young people, that's a deadly combination: In many ethnic groups, a young person's ability to stabilize socially and economically is rooted in coming-of-age rituals that lead to marriage or some accumulation of wealth. When land becomes less fertile and water runs short, rural youth find themselves taking rites of passage to an extreme.

In the past, boys showed their bravado and gained power or dowry material by participating in livestock raids. These days, however, with organized crime and an influx of weapons, this sometimes translates into illicit activity such as robberies and drug and arms trafficking. Many girls are “married” as children and subjected to female genital mutilation before they're considered eligible for marriage. Plus, many of these youth are migrating to slums to fend for themselves, leaving them vulnerable to gangs, rape, and prostitution.

“They no longer have the structure like aunts and uncles to assist with the maturity of a child,” noted Crystal Corman, an organizer for World Faiths Development Dialogue. The group hosted an event in August that brought together 60 Kenya-based peace practitioners and 43 religious leaders and organizations to anonymously discuss faith-inspired options for resolving social, political, and religious conflicts as a nation and within their own religious communities.

During last summer's forum, Corman learned about Kenyan Christians promoting safer rituals and more progressive rites of passage in a program called “Rites of Passage Experiences” (ROPES). The program was introduced to Kenyan youth in 1997 as the flagship of the Christian organization Tanari Trust. Rather than sing songs about brave cattle rustlers, as boys might have done in the past, boys learn to sing about becoming successful entrepreneurs. Instead of girls having their genitals cut, they might be asked to engage in a sacrificial fast. And both genders might participate in agribusiness workshops. They might pledge to delay marriage until finishing high school or college.

“Through the ROPES program, the church becomes this extended community to



make sure that the child has a variety of role models and information sources,” Corman said.

But she too believes that more needs to be done with interfaith dialogue in Kenya. She said many Christians complained they don't have access to the Quran in languages such as Swahili and English, which they believe would help them study the Muslim faith and build tolerance through theological understanding. At the same, Corman encouraged Christians to consider their own fundamentalist notions and the ways they might have privileged access to power.

“Both groups said they wanted to better understand what was worrying the youth, what made them think about joining a violent extremist group,” said Corman, adding that they wanted to do more listening.

Listening is important, but too often peacemakers are afraid to speak. Leaders such as Sakar said that youth often don't feel safe speaking with international reporters, which makes it difficult to hear their experience first-hand. Mwangi is an exception; she was comfortable speaking freely because of her experience with internationals in the U.N.-connected refugee camp.

Mwangi's career aspirations are tied to the peacemaking she promotes through essays, speeches, and participation at home and in international forums. In 2010, she joined Rafiki Link, a local program sponsored by Ubuntu, a technology organization based in Austin, Texas, that helps Kenyan youth gain computer skills by writing essays and producing videos about peace building. After earning a peace essay award in her school, she was invited to Austin to attend the 2012 peace summit of the international youth leadership organization Amala Foundation.

Mwangi is studying for a college degree in tourism and hopes to continue promoting travel to her own country. Tourism is one of many industries in Kenya that depends on peace in the country. She hopes to help build a foundation of peace there by one day creating her own organization to help youth become effective liaisons between their communities and the government.

That's just the kind of activism Kuria is hoping for. “Youth leaders in institutions of higher learning could play a major role for peace in Kenya,” Kuria said. “They represent a huge yet untapped potential as they have a large influence on their peers.” ■

*Julienne Gage is a freelance journalist in Washington, D.C. She spent time reporting in Kenya in 2012 for the International Reporting Project.*

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by LISA SHARON HARPER

**Two stories of transformation by God's love and power.**

# The Samaritan Woman *And Me*

**JESUS REMINDS** the Samaritan woman at the well that she was created for living water—she, the rejected one, was created for water that brings God's healing, God's acceptance, God's wholeness. She was created for God's peace between ethnic groups. She was created for God's peace between genders. She was not created for the wilderness. She was created for places where living water springs from the earth and waters everything and everyone in its path. This hardened woman was created to be loved, and to love.

Humanity's broken relationship with God is the ultimate cause of all other brokenness. It all stands as evidence of the initial break. In another sense, there is no way humanity could violate relationship with any other created being and not violate its relationship with God. All of creation is bound together by one thing: relationship with our Creator. It is Creator God's love that binds us all together: To break one tie is to break them all.

And it all unraveled, from verse to verse and chapter to chapter. But that was not the end of the story; it was only the beginning. The first humans were tempted to grasp for their own way to peace in the garden, but their futile reach left them emptier than when they began. They reached for peace and received what Jesus called "well water."

Like the ultimate Harriet Tubman committed to calling humanity to come home—to find the love it was created for—Jesus sits at the well and says to the nameless enemy, "Give me a drink." And he doesn't only speak to her heart. He also speaks to her mind. She has real

concerns about the rightful place of worship, concerns hewn out of centuries of ethnic strife. Jesus engages her questions.

SOON AFTER beginning high school, I was invited by a friend to attend an area-wide camp meeting, where a guest preacher was headlining a revival. Surrounded by woods and ticks, the cicadas sang as our guest preacher took the stage, just off a two-lane country road in Erma, N.J. My church's youth group sat in a middle row toward the back of the wooden pavilion where we listened intently as the preacher screamed about hell for what felt like forever. Then, as the organ played, he invited the lost forward to get right with God by accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. He urged us not to wait another minute.

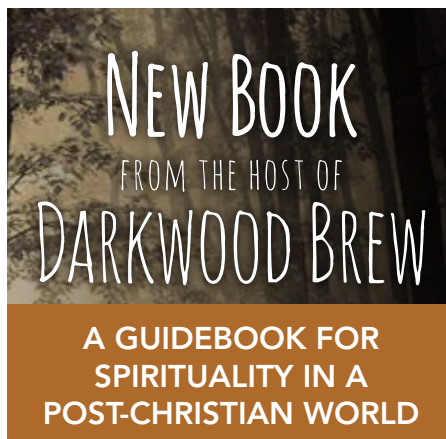
I sat there, unsure if I should go forward. I remembered all the things I'd done for God over the past year—walk-a-thons and sing-a-thons for Jesus, abstaining from drinking at the school musical's cast party. I wasn't sure if I was a Christian yet or not. When would I know? When could I be sure of my salvation and stop wondering during every altar call if I should walk forward?

Illustration by M.P. Wiggins









"As both a friend of Eric's work and of the man, let me say that *Gifts of the Dark Wood* is his finest achievement. Eric writes with the fierce honesty of a mystic, the soul of a true priest—one who truly ministers to others—and the pen of a prophet. This is a road-map giving us a path for following the Spirit."

—FRANK SCHAEFFER,  
author of *Why I Am an Atheist*  
*Who Believes in God*

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 Abingdon Press

In the middle of my mental gymnastics, my friend tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I would go forward with her. To this day, I don't understand why she felt the need to go forward. I thought she was already a Christian. I went with her nonetheless. We knelt side by side at the altar, where she wept openly. Soon, I felt sobs well up from somewhere deep in my own soul. It was like something in my spirit threw up its hands and said to God: "Okay, you win. I'm not going to fight any more. I give up." It was a giving up of control, of the need to be the master of my own fate, of the need to earn my own heaven. Then it was even more. As I sobbed alongside my friend, we were surrounded by old ladies who comforted us. It was a strange feeling—it felt like a spiritual homecoming, like old souls ushering younger ones through a threshold to a spiritual place called "home." What happened in me that night was about power and love. As tears fell on the wooden altar, I felt surrounded by the heart of God: I knew God loved me.

And while the preacher had focused on hell, I've come to understand that God's work in me that night was less about salvation from hell in an afterlife, though I do believe in the reality of hell. Rather, that night was about power—the power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead to reverse the Fall here on earth *and* in the afterlife.

On that late summer's night, I rose from the altar and was overcome by a wave of laughter. I felt giddy, lighter, and new, as if a light had been turned on in my soul. As if I had woken up after a lifelong haze of half-sleep, half-life. I could feel it, though I didn't yet have the language for it. I felt the power of the resurrection. As my friends drove me home, I remember thinking: "I wonder if I'll still be a Christian 10 years from now." That was 1983.

IN THE DAYS of antebellum slavery, enslaved people of African descent were not legally permitted to marry. Their unions were not recognized by law, so instead of a marriage ceremony, men and women—who vowed to love, serve, and protect each other till death, the master's whip, or sale made them part—signified their commitment to each other by jumping in unison over a handcrafted broom. On one side of the broom, they were single; on the other, the two became one in the spiritual realm, even if their union was not recognized by law. I've come to refer to the night I walked down the aisle as the night I jumped the broom with Jesus. That night Jesus said, "I love you, Lisa. You are worth

pursuing. I have pursued you across 2,000 years of time. I broke the barriers of time and space to be with you ... again." That night, I said yes to Jesus. I dropped my well water at the altar, and Jesus' living water began to trickle up from my soul.

My problems, issues, and brokenness weren't all taken away that night. But something real, something transformative happened at that altar. I entered back into relationship with God, through the person of Jesus. In the decades since, God has revealed the presence and impact of broken relationships in my life. God has revealed a deep sense of self-hatred and shame, as well as broken relationships with men that stem from childhood abuse. God revealed a penchant toward over-consumption and disregard for the rest of creation. God revealed hopelessness for the healing of my fractured family, as well as the reality of my social, economic, and political status as an African American in the U.S. and within the evangelical church. God also revealed my American privilege on the global stage.

The revelations came slowly, as I was able to handle them, with guidance from others who had trod the paths before. With each revelation, God brought light, healing, and redemption. The healings didn't always come in the form I imagined them, but they came—in God's way, in God's time. And 32 years later I am still waiting on God for some of the most stubborn brokenness in my soul and life to be healed, and I am partnering with God to bring healing to some of the most broken corners of our society and world.

The nameless Samaritan woman dropped her jar of well water and went back to the city to talk to the people she had tried to avoid. But something was different now. She was bold, confident, and actively loving the people who had shamed her. With no concern for what they thought of her, the woman told them about her encounter with Jesus. The text tells us: "Many of the Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39). This shamed, rejected, marginalized, ethnic enemy became the first person in John's gospel to communicate the very good news and bring transformation to an entire city. The Samaritan woman and her city were transformed by God's love and power. ■

*Lisa Sharon Harper is Sojourners' chief church engagement officer. This article is adapted from The Very Good Gospel (copyright 2016) by Lisa Sharon Harper. Published with permission of WaterBrook, an imprint of Penguin Random House, LLC.*



# Signs of Things to Come

**FOR THOSE PAYING** attention, this has been a fairly terrifying winter and spring. And I don't just mean the presidential election. I mean that the signals we're getting from the natural world indicate we're crossing thresholds much more quickly than expected.

February, for instance, was the most anomalously hot month ever recorded on the planet, crushing all records. The world had pledged in Paris in December to try to hold global temperature increases to 1.5 degrees Celsius—well, February was just about at that level already.

The elevated temperatures were especially noticeable in the Arctic—for long stretches of the winter the region as a whole was as much as 18 degrees Fahrenheit above average. (Christmas Eve was almost 50 degrees warmer than normal at the North Pole). Not surprisingly, this meant the lowest levels of Arctic sea ice ever recorded by late March.

Meanwhile in the Antarctic, new data showed that sea level may be set to rise far faster than expected, as the great ice sheets start to slide into the ocean—the water could go up by meters in the course of this cen-

**If you're not afraid of what we've unleashed, it's because you're not paying sufficient attention.**

ture, which would make the defense of most of the world's great cities a nightmare.

And the damage wasn't confined to the poles. In the tropics, extreme hot sea temperatures meant that we had the most widespread coral bleaching ever observed. One scientist, coming back from an aerial survey that found half the coral bleached in northern sectors of the Great Barrier Reef, called it "the saddest research trip" he'd ever taken.



An activist offers prayers for rice farmers killed and injured by police during protests of the Philippines government's refusal to offer aid after devastating crop losses.

One could offer 100 examples of the damage these changes are causing to human communities—the record wind speeds in the cyclone that crashed into Fiji, the absurd floods in Pakistan. Or—and this is really a nightmare vision of the future—the protesters killed by police in the drought-stricken Philippines in early April. The farmers were marching to protest the lack of aid to help them cope with slashing drought that had wrecked their crops; they were asking for, if nothing else, some rice.

They were met with gunfire. As I'm writing this, the death toll stands at three, and there are still dozens of protesters holed up in a Methodist Church surrounded by police. They're calling it the "bullets for rice" protest, and I fear that what it shows is what will happen over and over again on this stressed planet as the years wear on: Stretched to the breaking point by climatic

upheaval, people will demand change that political systems are unwilling to yield. The results will be tragic.

As I've said, the Paris agreements on climate already seem somewhat out of date—we need far faster progress if we have even the slightest hope of getting ahead of the physics of global warming. We can do it—with each passing month the engineers drop the price of a solar panel a few more notches. But we've got to go at it with far more vigor.

Some people will be motivated by hope. And some people—just as correctly—will be motivated by fear. If you're not afraid of what we've unleashed, it's because you're not paying sufficient attention. ■



**Bill McKibben**, a Sojourners contributing editor, is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College in Vermont and founder of 350.org.



By Robert Hirschfield

## Lyrics and **Litanies**

The poetry of Parneshia Jones bears witness to the past and the present.

---

*We are the long grass and anxious wind,  
the generations, speaking softly, between  
the lines of history.*

**IN THE POEMS OF PARNESHIA JONES**, 35, the lines of black history that angled north from the Deep South after the First World War empty into the bruised and tender histories of family and community.

The lines above are from “Legacy,” one of the poems from her first collection, *Vessel* (Milkweed Editions), dedicated to Evanston, Ill., Jones’ hometown, and the home of Shorefront, the organization that documents black lives on the North Shore of Chicago.

“I had a lot of storytellers around me growing up,” Jones tells *Sojourners*. “My grandmother was a storyteller, my grandpop was a storyteller. I was always the youngest of the



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Danny Duncan Collum on Peter Case's gospel

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Anne Colamosca on *Spain in Our Hearts*

*old Greek movie, hears the word Parnassus.*

Parnassus, nexus of poetry, according to the Greeks.

"A name," she says, "is an heirloom from your parents."

*Vessel* is, among other things, a book of names. (Like the Bible, her interviewer teases her.) Names that come at you from every point on her compass: her grandmother Mary Ella Starling, Marvin Gaye and Muriel Rukeyser, Anna Magnani and

**"As long as I speak people's names and tell their stories, I am doing what has to be done."**

Josephine Baker, Mae West and Barack Obama.

Names that ferry a life.

There is an unshadowed ease to her, to the poems of her early life. They are lighted with humor. "Bra Shopping," for instance, is a colloquial coming-of-age narrative far removed from the sober lyricism of "Legacy." ("I really wanted it to find its place as sheer storytelling," she says.)

Jones wrote the poem as a grad student at Spalding University in Kentucky. When Caroline Kennedy heard her read it at poet Ellen Hagan's DreamYard project for the arts in the South Bronx, Kennedy immediately decided to publish it in her anthology on womanhood, *She Walks in Beauty*. The publication of "Bra Shopping" was the first step in the direction of modest acclaim leading eventually to *Vessel's* publication.

What size is she? *The nosy bra woman asks.*  
You want something that will support them  
honey,

*The bra woman winks while my mother inspects.*

Oh she's good size. She's way out of that training-bra phase.

I want her to have something that will hold them up proper.

Continued on Page 43

Poet Parneshia Jones

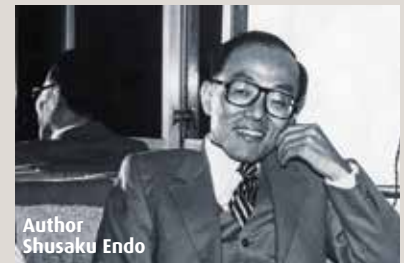
group, so I was trained to listen. When you listen to everyone else, you carve out a space to listen to yourself. Young poets should listen more to their families, to the voices they heard growing up."

The poet says she was raised in her grandfather's juke joint. He migrated north from Mississippi. Her first dog came from Gypsies who hung out outside his clubs.

Jones' voice, even when banked by the din of a mid-Manhattan restaurant, is soft, leisurely. Telling her story, she will not be hurried. Her story begins with a portentous name, the spawn of chance.

1. 1980—daughter of high school sweethearts (prom queen and football captain). Father, a Creole southern rolling stone, watches an

**New & Noteworthy**



Author  
Shusaku Endo

**WHEN GOD SEEMS HIDDEN**

Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel *Silence* tells of the persecution of Christians in 17th century Japan. Japanese-American artist Makoto Fujimura uses this novel as a springboard for an exploration of faith, art, trauma, and cultural heritage in the book *Silence and Beauty: Hidden Faith Born of Suffering*. IVP Books

**CAMBRIDGE CHORALE**

The undergraduate choir of Trinity College Cambridge, directed by Stephen Layton, released a new live recording of Herbert Howells' *Collegium Regale*. Recorded in Coventry Cathedral, it is a beautifully dynamic and spiritual rendition of an Anglican masterpiece. Hyperion

**BEATING THE GREEN BLUES**

For *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action*, theologian and former Earth Institute Fellow Erin Lothes Biviano spoke with members of diverse faith communities to uncover the moral, spiritual, and practical motivations (and barriers) to transforming ecological concern into inspired, sustained action. Orbis

**COMMUNITY OF CHRIST**

In *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People*, Charles E. Moore provides the wisdom of those who have lived in community, from Henri Nouwen to Dorothy Day to Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, to make the case for why Christians should live together. Plough Publishing House

## Rollin' on Down the Highway

**HIGHWAY 62** runs from Niagara Falls, N.Y., to El Paso, Texas, and is the only U.S. highway to connect Canada and Mexico. In my home state of Kentucky, it passes the Wild Turkey distillery at Lawrenceburg and the state maximum security penitentiary at Eddyville.

Further north it takes you to Buffalo, N.Y., the hometown of roots music singer-songwriter Peter Case. That's why he picked *HWY 62* as the title for his latest album, a collection that can be taken as a sort of "state of the nation" recording. *The Christian Science Monitor* even said that the album "plays like a John Steinbeck novel set to music." And they have a point. Most of the album's 11 songs are peopled with prisoners and deportees, the evicted and the gentrified, and other 21st-century American outcasts.

Unlike many folkie populists, Case comes by his sympathy for the down-and-out honestly, if a little

*HWY 62* is peopled with prisoners, deportees, the evicted, and other 21st-century American outcasts.

foolishly. Back on that lost planet that was the 1970s, he dropped out of high school to become a musician and eventually landed on the streets of San Francisco, hungry, homeless, and frequently drunk. This part of Case's life is covered unsparingly in the blog/memoir that he keeps at [petercase.com](http://petercase.com), some of which has become a book, *As Far as You Can Get Without a Passport*.

After a near-miss with the pop-punk band The Nerves, Case got his ticket to the music business punched with The Plimsouls, whose hit, "A Million Miles Away," was one of the high-water marks of jangly 1980s New Wave rock. But then, just before he could become really



Singer-songwriter  
Peter Case

YouTube

rich and famous, Case's contrarian streak reasserted itself. He left the band and started what now looks to be the rest of his life as a singer-songwriter who sometimes records with the likes of T Bone Burnett and Ry Cooder, but most often performs solo with his own acoustic guitar and harmonica.

Throughout his 11 solo albums, Case has earned a modest but loyal following with his flawlessly crafted, subtle, and closely observed portraits of the life he sees in America's bars, coffeehouses, and truck stops. *HWY 62* delivers more of that, but with a heavier than usual emphasis on the big-world political causes of much American misery. In fact, the opening track, "Pelican Bay," is a stirring, old-school acoustic protest song about the notorious California supermax prison of its title, the torture that is long-term solitary confinement, and the moral blight of mass incarceration. The same theme is picked up later in "All Dressed Up (For Trial)," a glossy, catchy pop tune about a man facing charges with a judge, prosecutor, and even a public defender who don't see his fine courtroom suit but

only his dark skin that marks him as jailhouse-bound.

Around the time in the 1980s that Case made his turn toward roots music, he also discovered Christianity, and that has stuck, too. He doesn't preach, or even talk about his faith much, but it's there, for instance, in the biblical references of "Water from a Stone." After an opening verse about an orphaned minor in a U.S. court facing deportation comes the chorus: "She needs water, water from a stone, living water, water from a stone." And then there are the people in "Evicted" who are "on our way home, turned out to roam" in a world that "wouldn't let their savior in."

These references are nice, and never overbearing, but Case's Christianity, like yours or mine, will ultimately be judged by his empathy for "the least of these"—the hungry, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. And on those grounds, *HWY 62* is one of the most Christian albums I've recently heard. ■

*Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel White Boy, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.*





Continued from Page 41

*Them ... them ... them, she says.*

*Like they're two midgets I keep strapped to my chest.*

*I stand there while these two women, one my own kin, discuss the maintenance and storage of my two dependents.*

The bold, multileveled leap from “Bra Shopping” to “Resurrection under the Moon,” a poem about love between black slaves, makes you wonder for a moment whether the two poems could have been written by the same woman.

*He hurtin' bad.*

*Master made sure he made his point with slashed welts traveling like serpents across his back.*

Her song of lament moves, in the final stanzas of “Resurrection,” to an interpersonal resurrection that rises from the depths of the slave’s existential death.

*There ain't no room for fear when we lovin' each other, this ain't for the takin', rapin', or slavin'. Master can't have this part of us.*

*I let him love me all night. I know my lovin' keep him from the slave grave.*

*black woman's love ain't nothing casual. Our love brings our men back from the dead.*

Asked about the absence of anger in such poems, Jones says, “I choose to take things like anger and sorrow and turn them into litanies. Anger only takes you so far. As long as I speak people’s names and tell their stories, I am doing what has to be done. Every year, when 9/11 rolls around, there is a litany, and litanies echo.”

The black Christian music of abiding is there as well when writing about a more recent tragedy, the killings of more than two dozen black children in Atlanta from 1979 to 1981:



Helen Mirren in *Eye in the Sky*.

## THE CROSSHAIRS OF A DILEMMA

**STANLEY KUBRICK’S *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*** was released in 1964, and it was echoed later that year by a film on a similar topic, ***Fail-Safe***. Directed by Sidney Lumet, *Fail-Safe* imagined the idea of a nuclear explosion being unpreventable by the people supposed to be in charge of it. *Strangelove* is hilarious but chilling satire; *Fail-Safe* is just chilling. The central notion, that ethics can’t be trusted to machines, lingers today: George Clooney produced a live television version of *Fail-Safe* as recently as 2000.

A current version of the dilemma is brilliantly portrayed in ***Eye in the Sky***. Cutting between four main locations (a British government committee room, a military control center in the English countryside, a Nevada drone piloting bunker, and the Kenyan house from where a suicide bomb attack may be launched), it’s like a relentless tennis match in which the crisscrossing ball is a matter of life and death.

Who decides who can be killed? If blowing up the house will prevent an attack that might kill 80 people, how much does it matter that a little girl selling bread nearby will probably die too? What is legal? Does “legal” mean “right”? Such questions have rarely been handled with such compelling dexterity in a movie. *Eye in the Sky* deserves comparison with *Dr. Strangelove* and *Fail-Safe*

because it doesn’t offer easy answers, only difficult questions, and its seamless movement between locations fully immerses the audience inside the debate. But it transcends those earlier films because of the way it treats the characters that might be seen as “other.”

The Kenyan agent played by Barkhad Abdi is the most heroic figure here, and the little girl is not played for sentiment but to confront the (mostly Western) audience with questions of complicity in the oppression of people whose lives already began at a disadvantage. As for the white saviors who don’t know how to save, along with subtle turns from Helen Mirren and Alan Rickman (in his last on-screen appearance) as military brass, most striking is the government minister (Jeremy Northam) who wants to do the right thing but can’t be sure what that is.

Movie politicians are rarely portrayed as ordinary people (un)lucky enough to have to make decisions most of us might find impossible. But Northam represents the paradox of holding power without the assurance of moral authority. *Eye in the Sky* examines such power, authority, and morality, without catharsis for the audience. There are no easy answers for its characters, so it doesn’t provide them to us either. ■

*Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and the founder of moviesandmeaning.com.*

*Mamas and daddies  
up all hours  
pacing  
searching for their murdered  
angels with mutilated wings.*

Raised in a Baptist church, where her grandmother was an usher, Jones is no longer a churchgoer.

"I feel myself more spiritual than I can ever be religious. I would call myself a poet of spiritual values. I believe in something much bigger than us. There has to be in the way the world moves all throughout history. But we just don't know until we get to the other side."

One day, in a phone conversation, Jones is asked about the current spate of killings of young blacks by police. She is quiet at her end, somewhere in Texas, where she is enjoying the refuge of a writing retreat. There is nothing casual about her words or her silences. She is not someone who holds carelessly what she says or what she doesn't say.

"I will say this: It is an epidemic, a disease. It's not just something that's going to harm people of color. It's going to harm all people. It's not necessarily about Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter. It's about this is what you are going to carry in your history."

Her body of work since *Vessel* bears only one poem about the latest cycle of racial violence. It is called "Bikini Care Instructions." It is a poem that carries inside it many poems. It is dedicated to "Dajerria Becton, the 15-year-old girl slammed to the ground, wearing only a bikini, by a Texas police officer in full uniform at a pool party in front of her friends and the world."

*You can not hand wash away grass stains  
from the kneading of blue knees  
in the smooth sea horse back  
of a fifteen year old brown girl.*

The stains reappear in her final stanza. She will not let go of them.

*How many times will we keep washing the  
same stains  
washing and wringing out the same old story  
and hanging it out to dry. ■*

**Robert Hirschfield** is a New York City-based freelance writer.

Reviewed by Cherice Bock

## A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

*Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God,*  
by Todd Wynward. Herald Press.

**REMEMBER THE** thrill that went through you when C.S. Lewis told you Aslan is not a tame lion? I sometimes forget about this untamed image of God when ensconced in my "safe" Christian community.

In his recent book *Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God*, Mennonite minister and permaculture practitioner Todd Wynward reminds us of the importance of the wilderness in the Bible and in Christian history. Wynward calls his book an "unapologetic rallying cry to rewind a Christianity that has become terribly tame."

He argues for a third way of enacting discipleship: not the radical renunciation of ascetics, open only to the childless and unattached, nor a life of unexamined affluence, but a life of spiritual resilience where we develop strong, place-based communities of praxis who care for one another and creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. He invites us to remember the transformation

stories of many from Christian history who followed this way. Peppered throughout are his own experiences and those of other contemporary individuals and organizations attempting to live in the way he suggests. He also utilizes ecological metaphors, pointing out that Jesus and the early disciples did not have the New Testament and often used metaphors from nature to explain spiritual concepts. The book is prophetic and hopeful, beseeching us to live out the radical discipleship exemplified in the biblical narrative, holding out hope that we can do so for the benefit of ourselves, future living beings, and our relationship with God.

*Rewilding the Way* is premised on our definition of the "good life." Are we experiencing the good life here in the United States with our cheap food and ever-faster technology? Are we free? Do we feel satisfied? Are our innovations creating more just societies? Or do we still yearn for something deeper, a faith that calls for an actual repentance,

## Wynward discusses environmental justice, activism, and urban projects that rewild spaces closer to home.

that occurs through the wilderness testing of Moses and the Israelites, many of the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostle Paul, and the desert fathers and mothers. In the wilderness we learn about "enough," trusting God, and how much we need one another. We learn about our paradoxical smallness and value to our loving God.

A text like this could reinforce Christian contemplative navel-gazing and a personal experience of God as only available in the sublime elements of nature, unreachable in a sullied built environment. Wynward avoids this pitfall by focusing on community and a covenanted right relationship with God, others, and creation. He discusses environmental justice, activism, and urban projects that rewild spaces closer to home.

Wynward creates a solid foundation of biblical examples to back up his communal wilderness praxis paradigm and shares

a turning around? Do we desire a community that invites us to right relationship, providing safety not based simply in security and comfort but in a network of support and prophetic challenge to truly live out the good news in our own time and place?

I won't lie: I loved this book. It would be useful for adult small groups and certain undergraduate and seminary classrooms, and it would provide inspiring reading for a pastor looking for fodder for a sermon series on creation care. It's also very accessible for the average Christian. Although Wynward refers to many theologians and individuals from the Bible, church history, and modern contexts, he introduces each of them so that no prior knowledge is necessary. Along the way, his knack for putting together biblical passages with modern examples opens up the reader's imagination to see these ideas come to life. His honest sharing of



his failures and successes provides further authority.

Read this book if you're ready to walk both a spiritual and literal wilderness trail, trusting in the Spirit's power of enough and daily persevering through step after arduous and satisfying step on the Jesus Way. ■

*Cherice Bock teaches courses in social justice and Christian earthkeeping at George Fox University and Seminary and is a Ph.D. student in environmental studies at Antioch University New England.*

*Reviewed by Anne Colamosca*

## IDEOLOGIES AND IDEALISM

*Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, by Adam Hochschild. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

**FUELED BY DEEP** economic insecurity, terrorist acts, and an influx of thousands of Middle Eastern refugees fleeing their homelands, a slew of bellicose, ultra-right-wing parties throughout Europe are gaining popularity in 2016. Some are reminded of the 1930s when fascists Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini and communist strongman Joseph Stalin all held power, along with dictators in several smaller states.

Today's mostly democratically led Europe, of course, is a far cry from that bloody, disastrous decade, but the real angst that prevails still gives cause for alarm and analysis. In *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, veteran journalist Adam Hochschild takes us back to what is seen as an important prelude to World War II.

In 1936, a broad coalition of mainly left-wing parties—liberals, socialists, anarchists, and communists—narrowly won national elections in Spain. In response Spanish Gen. Francisco Franco, supported by the fascist governments of Hitler and Mussolini, launched a rebellion against the new government. The left-leaning government forces and its supporters became collectively known as the Republicans; Franco and his coalition of the military, landed aristocracy, and most of the Catholic Church hierarchy were known as the Nationalists.

## EXCERPT

### GOD OF THE UNIVERSE

An astrophysicist and ordained pastor looks for God in new ways.

**WHAT ARE WE** to do with an obsolete God?

We have options. We could, as I did for a while, put God aside. ... We can try, but I'm pretty sure that God is the question that won't go away. Silence it here and it will pop up over there. It may show up as worship of science, or the economy, or a political cause, or ego, or an addiction, or sex, or a fellow human being—or whatever, but show up it will. Some humanists and atheists have expressed contempt for religious believers' worship of God.

They ask, Why worship anything at all? One online interlocutor once asked me, "How can you put the word 'worship' on your signs? Isn't that demeaning?" I replied, "No, it is truth in advertising. We all worship something." I am convinced that not all worship is true worship, but I am equally convinced that religious believers at least acknowledge that worship is simply what all people, religious and otherwise, do. There's nothing for it but to accept it and make the best of it.

We could also try to build a new God out of the raw materials of science itself. It's hard to disagree with Ralph Waldo Emerson when he writes, "Nothing is great but the inexhaustible wealth of nature. She shows us only some surfaces, but she is a million fathoms deep." Isn't the cosmos astounding, and isn't the wonder it stirs in us something akin to a religious feeling? Yes and yes. Without such feelings there would be no religion at all. But are such feelings enough? Is the mind-blowing order and complexity and diversity and beauty of the cosmos sufficient to slake

our religious thirst? For some it may be and I can nearly, but not quite, imagine how it could be enough for me.

Just a few minutes ago I walked out of my office onto the college quad. There in the western sky I observed a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter.

At the moment, these two brightest of planets were so close together in the sky that they nearly looked like a single brilliant star. It's a wonderful and beautiful sight, and in the very best and truest sense of those words. I stood there transfixed for longer than I care to admit. But in the end the



cosmos, taken alone as a bare physical reality, leaves me cold. Its power and beauty is considerable, but it is not up to my personal need for God.

Therefore we seek more constraints. In our search for a new model of God we try to remain, insofar as possible, within the Christian tradition. As we shall see, it is possible to do so. There are resources within Christianity as we know it that will help us find God in this infinite, alien, and evolving cosmos our forebears could never have imagined. The Bible, in fact, has something wondrous for those who feel lost because we cannot square our old ideas of God with that cosmos. There is a story there that removes human beings from the center of the cosmos, points us toward the cosmic margins for inspiration, and encourages us to trust our own doubts and questions about life, the universe, and everything. ■

*From Stars Beneath Us: Finding God in the Evolving Cosmos, by Paul Wallace. Copyright 2016 Fortress Press. Reprinted by permission of Augsburg Fortress.*



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## CultureWatch

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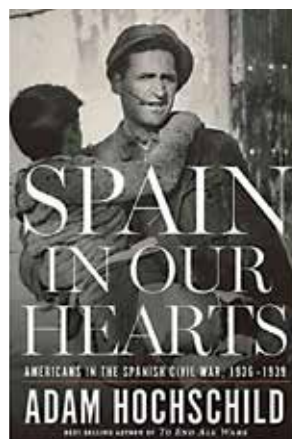
This conflict, a democratically elected government attempting to fight off a fascist uprising, became the focus of international attention.

Hochschild explores the passion, commitment, and dangerous “boots on the ground” actions by Americans who volunteered to fight the fascists in Spain. Hochschild has excavated a rich trove of memoirs, letters, and unpublished books that these volunteers left behind.

The Republicans had only one foreign government supporting it, the Soviet Union, which was still seen by many at that time as a country on the side of workers, “a place,” writes Hochschild, “onto which millions of people projected their hopes.” The major European democracies, along with the U.S., opted against getting involved in Spain’s civil war.

Close to half of the American volunteers to fight for the Republicans were Jewish, most often working-class trade unionists from New York City. “For us it wasn’t Franco, it was always Hitler,” one volunteer poignantly remarked. Many had no military training and were placed in dangerous situations with rusty military equipment handed out by Soviet soldiers. There were also black volunteers, some of them angry about Mussolini’s war on Ethiopia. Of 2,800 volunteers, 750 died, “a far higher death rate than the U.S. military suffered in any of its 20th-century wars.”

One of the casualties was Bob Merriman, a Berkeley-trained economist with only ROTC training, who eventually lost his life in battle. Ernest Hemingway, who covered the war as a journalist, used Merriman as the model for the main character, Robert Jordan, in his novel *For Whom the Bells Tolls*. “The novel showed a more capacious political understanding of the war than [Hemingway’s] journalism,” writes Hochschild. Hemingway, like a number of other Western reporters who strongly sympathized with the Republicans,



**“For us it wasn’t Franco, it was always Hitler,” one volunteer poignantly remarked.**

often omitted information that reflected badly on them or their Soviet supporters in his newspaper articles. British writer George Orwell, on the other hand, in Spain both to fight for the Republicans and report on the war, would write of Soviet-controlled troops shooting other Republican troops that were not under Stalin’s control, disproving the notion that Stalin could be trusted. On the battlefields, ideologies and idealism became a bloody mess.

Hochschild writes of a Massachusetts social worker who went to Spain in 2012 to pay tribute to her uncle who had died there. Kneeling where the battle had been fought, she said, “I told him we hon-

ored his goodness and idealism and that the world turned out to be a much more politically complicated truth than he could have known. ... Then I paused, and somehow I managed to say kaddish.”

Maybe because of those complicated truths, we can’t afford to forget about the Spanish Civil War. Unlike WWII, it shows the full, bloody horror of fascist victory. Franco remained in power for 35 years. As ultra-right parties emerge and flourish in the 21st century, demonstrations, sit-ins, and other peaceful populist reactions against demagogues will become increasingly important. Famed British historian Richard J. Evans, an expert on the Third Reich, once remarked in a graduate seminar at Columbia University, “My view is that Hitler’s rise to power was not pre-destined by German history. Things could have gone in a very different direction. Along the way, there were numerous opportunities for Germans to speak up and stop Hitler early on. Very few did this.” ■

*Anne Colamosca is a former staff writer at Business Week and has written for many national magazines and newspapers.*





## Congressman Lewis Spoke About President Obama

John Lewis came to shake hands that already shook—old veterans on the Fourth of July. He was an archer whose shot arced straight to the heart of the matter with what he said, the way he said it. The vets felt the calm of a man who'd learned the worst thing about being alive was the people you lived among.

Lewis spoke of how days before he'd gone to Charleston, when President Obama went to eulogize Reverend Pinckney. Lewis told the vets how the people sat in funeral finery, listened for memorial meaning, but there was nothing the President could say.

There were no words of comfort.

*So he preached,* Lewis said.

Obama opened his mouth—the grace on an empty stomach poured forth. Then he closed his mouth—for ten full seconds he stood, silent—until he looked up and out, raised his voice up and out, and sang.

Those doubled-over, de-limbed vets heard Lewis talk of an absence of rhetoric. He told those old soldiers how mourners were blessed with sermon, song, silence, how grave people *needed* to hear what words couldn't say, when their own mouths couldn't speak, on a bad day when they just wanted to listen.

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*Jane Simpson is a writer and poet living in Atlanta. On June 17, 2015, nine members of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., including pastor Clementa C. Pinckney, were murdered during Bible study in a racially motivated hate crime.*

**Above, veteran civil rights leader John Lewis, center, was attacked by Alabama state troopers during an attempted march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.**

Photo Bettmann/Getty Images

## Lead Us into the Light

**IF YOU ASSOCIATE PENTECOST** only with charismatic preachers, ecstatic worship, and tongue-talking, then you had better return to scripture. The lectionary passages for this Pentecost season are dark and sad, with a central focus on theodicy, which asks the question: How can there be a good and loving God when there is so much injustice, pain, and suffering in the world? The question has taken many forms: Is God a white racist? Is God a cosmic child abuser? Who can bear these questions, let alone seek to answer them?

Scripture gives no easy or trite answers. In fact, there are no clear attempts to resolve the issue. In the words of one writer reflecting on theodicy through her own battle with cancer: “I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: *Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.*” The lectionary reminds us over and over again that pain and suffering are part of life. You’ll have to weed through the popular theologies of the day, and even examine your own implicit theology, if you want to stand a chance at leading God’s people in how to respond to and live within the problem of pain and suffering in our world. Liberation is not always the conclusion. Neither is bondage. And blaming God is futile. At the core of these lectionary passages, you find a God who stands in the midst of suffering and pain, offering a variety of ways to cope, to heal, to resist.



*Brandon Wrencher is pastor of Blackburn's Chapel United Methodist Church and executive director of Blackburn Community Outreach in Todd, N.C.*

Since love  
wins, we can  
trust the promise  
of old: God  
is with  
us.

[ JUNE 5 ]

## Evangelism and Justice

1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17

**“PREACH THE GOSPEL** at all times; use words when necessary,” a phrase often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, reminds us that genuine revelation leads to mission. That’s a key message we find in the lectionary passages for this week.

The widow calls into question the authenticity of Elijah’s office: “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” (1 Kings 17:18). We long for the response to our gospel message to be that of the hymn: “O what must I do to be saved?” And yet this is not the Christendom of the past. In our post-Christian society, we must all be prepared to respond to the widow’s question to the “word from God” that arrives on our doorstep. How will you respond? If it is just with words or paternalistic feelings, then you’d better brush up on your

Bible. Faith without works is still dead. Any bifurcation between evangelism and justice isn’t biblical.

These passages make clear that God’s revelation is connected to widows and to an outsider, an enemy of the church. Could the mission be any clearer? God interacts with the world’s pain, suffering, and contradiction for its own restoration and for God’s glory. Restoring widows to community. Restoring enemies with new vision. Not only are evangelism and justice interconnected, one leads to the other: “God has looked favorably on God’s people!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country” (Luke 7:16b-17).

*“Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at [sojo.net/ptw](http://sojo.net/ptw).*

[ JUNE 12 ]

## Prayer or Entitlement?

1 Kings 21:1-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

**IN LIFE TOGETHER**, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Can we, then, pray the imprecatory psalms? In so far as we are sinners and express evil thoughts in a prayer of vengeance, we dare not do so. But in so far as Christ is in us, the Christ who took all the vengeance of God upon himself, who met God’s vengeance in our stead, who thus—stricken by the wrath of God—and in no other way, could forgive his enemies, who himself suffered the wrath that his enemies might go free—we, too, as members of this Jesus Christ, can pray these psalms, through Jesus Christ, from the heart of Jesus Christ.”

Ever been in trouble and tried to sweet-talk your way out of it? Any parent can see right through this with their kids! In a prayer, the psalmist compares himself to his enemies. There is a sense in which the psalmist is doing his own cajoling, of God: “But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house” (Psalm 5:7). Who of us has not pleaded with God to favor us over our enemy, whether a person or a situation? There’s always a line that can be crossed, when an innocent prayer of petition turns into a prayer of control. Is this not what we find in the story of Ahab? The imprecatory psalms are an easy go-to when we have a beef with someone or a conflict of some sort, interior or relational. The politics of entitlement lurk closely behind our genuine attempts to seek God’s favor and understanding. Our pursuit of what is good can turn into death for another (see 1 Kings 21:15-16). But what do we make of a prayer that desires holiness *because* of our enemies? Suffering, conflict, and trouble are real. In so far as Christ is in us—in the words of Bonhoeffer—we may pray and preach these words of the psalmist for God’s solidarity with us in the midst of trouble, for our healing, and for our enemies’ transformation.



[ JUNE 19 ]

## Where Is Your God?

1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 42, 43;  
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

**AT THE HEART** of the problem of evil and suffering is this question: "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3). Philosophers and theologians have debated it over the centuries. This is no academic question, though. It's a question about blood, sweat, and tears; about actual embodied suffering in our world. Intellectual answers won't hurt, but they don't solve the problem. It's a question that mocks, that unnerves, that disorients.

In the midst of this existential contradiction, the "comparative gaze" emerges as a mirage of the truth. The comparative gaze is any standard by which we judge ourselves and the world that is not according to Christ. Elijah tries to cope with his suffering by comparing himself to his ancestors (1 Kings 19:4). The church in Galatia gets caught up in this divisive practice as well, along the lines of race, class, and gender. No surprise that in our contemporary setting we struggle with these and more. In our own time this struggle takes on an elasticity, a triumphant tone: "Let's make America great again." U.S. Christianity vacillates between the prosperity gospel and racialized faith. The comparative gaze destroys the oppressed and the oppressor, crushes the humanity of the downtrodden. Fear is at its core; fear of the other, fear of the unknown.

The author of Galatians reminds us that the comparative gaze is made possible by the law, which seeks to distinguish between those that are and are not true children of God and therefore deserving of God's promises. The psalmist teaches us another way: lament and surrender. Lament names the truth about suffering, and invites *all* to a place of raw need before God. This is what it means to be "in Christ Jesus" (3:26), to be free, to be justified by the One who conquered sin and death in order that love would be triumphant. Since love wins, we can all belong and trust the promise of old: No matter the circumstances, God is with us.

[ JUNE 26 ]

## Lift Ev'ry Voice

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20;  
Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

**WHEN DOES** mourning turn to joy, fear turn to hope? The psalmist's transformation seems to happen in one chapter! Lest we make the common mistake of turning scripture into an instruction manual, we must see this chapter within the depth and complexity of the psalmist's fuller story. The psalmist begins with a clear indication of lament and sorrow because of God's seeming absence: "In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without weeping; my soul refuses to be comforted" (Psalm 77:2). The lectionary jumps from the pain of verse 2 to the psalmist's joy in the remaining verses of the chapter. What about the verses in between? There is lingering pain, an internal anguish that speaks through the psalmist's questions born of dereliction: "Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has God in anger shut up God's compassion?" (Psalm 77:9).

The selected verses for the lectionary silence struggle. Ours is a culture that silences too; silences pain, complaint, and anger, especially among those in our world whose backs are against the wall. Perhaps what is exposed in this silencing is the in-depth nature of contemporary Christian faith. But the psalmist offers wisdom in this story of grief turned to joy.

We need to recover the courage that emerges from the deep wells of those witnessings of faith that refused to cover-over pain, struggle, and doubt. The psalmist reminds us that such faith is often best spoken through the idiom of song. And yet we don't have to look back thousands of years to discover such a witness. The words of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the "black national anthem" written by James Weldon Johnson in 1899, reverberate through the generations, born of the faith of the black church. "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far on the way; thou who has by thy might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path, we pray." May we listen, be touched, and sing its dark faith! ■



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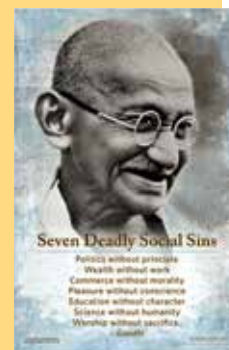
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## Going for the Gold (and the Pepto-Bismol)

**THAT STATUE** of Jesus standing with outstretched arms over Rio de Janeiro has always made a powerful impression on me; namely, how tired I would get if I did that for very long. These days, I don't even greet family members with outstretched arms without written permission from my orthopedist, much less stand on a hillside piously overlooking a large population. (Not that anyone would ask me to. I'm very busy.)

It's an awesome Jesus, although it has no moving parts and doesn't light up at Christmas. It's shorter than our own Statue of Liberty, and less green, and you can't walk up a stairway inside it to peer out the top of his head which, in my opinion, is the creepiest thing you can do inside an American shrine. Unless it's watching a baby spit up at the top of the Washington Monument, which I did years ago, after walking up the 897 steps to prove the stamina and grit of



a different time then, with a different mentality. Five centuries later, we now know you should always choose paper.

**SPEAKING PORTUGUESE** under the unblinking gaze of Jesus is the least of Rio's problems. In August, thousands of athletes and sports enthusiasts will arrive for the Olympic Games, this year featuring a variety of communicable diseases completely unrelated to the Zika virus that has affected so many. Local environmental conditions include dangerously contaminated water, polluted air, and a public health system so compromised one wonders why massive spending on new sports venues was so high on the national to-do list.

But you know how it is when corrupt local politicians get together with unrepentant members of the disgraced International Olympic Committee. After a few drinks they start drawing outdoor pools and giant soccer stadiums on cocktail napkins, then chuckle over how easy it will be to issue bonds that can never be repaid. Sadly, after a few more drinks tempers flare over whose secret bank account is bigger, until their limo drivers finally pull them apart. It's a flawed process that results in criminal malfeasance, international condemnation, and unconscionable diversion of the public's resources, but hey, it works.

U.S. ATHLETES are concerned about the risks posed by this year's

free-range amoeba games but optimistic they can once again bring home the gold, not to mention hepatitis A, cryptosporidiosis, viral gastroenteritis, encephalitis, and leptospirosis, to name a few in the first part of the alphabet. Naturally, silver and bronze winners would return with lesser conditions, such as severe diarrhea or an unexplained rash. But they will recover quickly and resume the enviable lives of Olympic champions who spend every waking moment wishing they'd been 1/200th of a second faster.

The events will test participants' athletic prowess, as well as their intestinal fortitude, which used to be just an expression of courage. At this Olympics, however, it will be literal. Projectile vomiting will be added to traditional track and field events of shot put and javelin, with distance still the primary criteria. (Points will be deducted if anything splashes on nearby officials.)

Awards will be given out after a three-day incubation period to see how participants respond to antibiotics, and the medals will be presented by members of the Olympic Committee not currently under indictment or house arrest in their home countries. Local Brazilian officials may be asked to fill in, although the same two criteria will apply.

And Jesus will be watching the whole thing. ■

*Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.*

**At this year's Olympic Games, remember the two p's: Purell and penicillin.**

youth. (Come to think of it, maybe it was me that spit up.)

Nonetheless, that Jesus statue stands over Rio, night and day, making the people below extremely uncomfortable because they're being constantly monitored by the Risen Lord. One can only hope that Rio's famous nude beaches are outside his peripheral vision. (No peeking, sir.)

Living in Rio is hard enough, what with speaking a language that's not quite Spanish. Portuguese is to Spanish as apples are to oranges, if the oranges tasted like bananas. Unlike the rest of South America, Brazil got stuck with Almost Spanish because in the late 1400s colonial powers Spain and Portugal divided up the continent using the negotiating technique of the day: rock, paper, scissors. Portugal chose rock. It was





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